



interzone 222

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READERS' POLL / NEWS / REVIEWS

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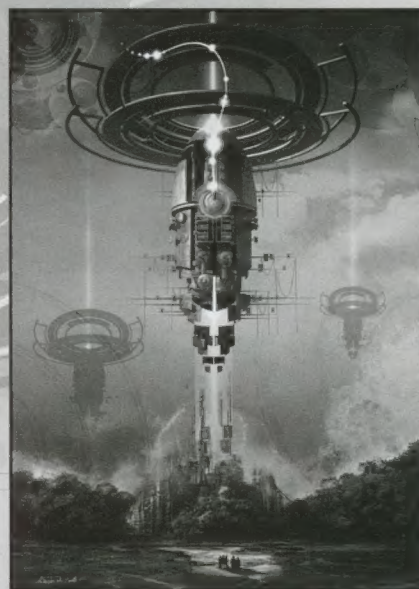
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Steve Rasnic Tem	Sara King
Eric Gregory	Nina Allan

Editorial

Ansible Link David Langford

In this issue you'll find the results of the Readers' Poll. Congratulations to Jason Sanford for topping the poll with 'When Thorns Are the Tips of Trees', and placing fourth with 'The Ships Like Clouds, Risen By Their Rain'. The latter is being reprinted in at least one Year's Best anthology: David Hartwell has taken it for his *Year's Best Science Fiction 14*. We think Jason had a very good 2008. Congratulations also to Kenn Brown for topping the Art poll for the second year running! Thanks everybody for your votes and comments, and to Martin for once again overseeing the whole process.

For the first time some readers were able to vote direct from the website (as well as the forum), thanks to the shiny new website built for us by regular contributor Paul Drummond. Please visit the site often, not only for regular updates (and to renew your subscriptions!) but for an increasing amount of online exclusive content that complements regular features and reviews in our magazines. For example, *Black Static* book reviewer Peter Tennant is already blogging up a storm, and we hope to add something similar to the *Interzone* section soon. We'll also dig out stuff from the archives occasionally, such as Andy Hedgecock's 2004 interview with David Peace, which Andy updated to coincide with the broadcast of *Red Riding*.

That's just phase one. We'll be adding a much needed new shop, a newsletter for subscribers, and fully incorporating our podcast *Transmissions From Beyond* and short-story reviews site *The Fix*.

Hopefully overseas subscribers will have noticed another improvement we've made recently: we're now using a much more reliable company for our overseas mail, and have upgraded the service to Priority which means your copies should be arriving much quicker. Don't forget that you can always let us know when your copy arrives on the forum's dedicated threads.

Finally, a couple of things I'd urge you not to miss.

The first is Paul Meloy's collection *Islington Crocodiles* which we've reprinted after selling out of the first edition. Everybody's raving about this book. Don't miss it again!

The other is *Black Static* issue 10, which we're giving away with all new *Black Static* and/or joint subscriptions received until the end of May.



Langford stymied by the terrifying Writer's Block (front)

BSFA Awards. Novel: Ken MacLeod, *The Night Sessions*. Short: Ted Chiang, 'Exhalation' (*Eclipse 2*). Nonfiction: Farah Mendlesohn, *Rhetorics of Fantasy*. Artwork: Andy Bigwood, cover of *Subterfuge* ed. Ian Whates.

As Others See Us. On *Red Dwarf* and coolth: 'For all his veniality and selfishness, Cat was a cool, smart dresser, unlike most *Red Dwarf* fans, who smelt of piss.' (Patrick West, *spiked*)

Hugo Shortlist. Novel: Neal Stephenson, *Anathem*; Neil Gaiman, *The Graveyard Book*; Cory Doctorow, *Little Brother*; Charles Stross, *Saturn's Children*; John Scalzi, *Zoe's Tale*. Related Book: Farah Mendlesohn, *Rhetorics of Fantasy*; Cathy & Arnie Fenner, eds, *Spectrum 15*; Lillian Stewart Carl & John Helfers, eds, *The Vorkosigan Companion*; Paul Kincaid, *What It Is We Do When We Read Science Fiction*; John Scalzi, *Your Hate Mail Will be Graded*. (Many categories omitted.) *Interzone* is up for Semiprozine as usual.)

Fantasy Centre, London's oldest-established genre bookshop, is to close: the proprietors Ted Ball and Erik Arthur have decided not to renew their lease in June.

Magazine Scene. Visual Imagination,

publisher of *Starburst*, *Shivers* and *Cult Times*, seems to have died. • The cancelled *US Realms of Fantasy* was bought by Tir Na Nog Press, and continues. • *Starlog* print publication entered 'temporary cessation'; it continues online.

Dave McKean's fantasy-themed UK postage stamps come out on 16 June.

As Others See Fantasy. Iranian TV exposed 'Harry Potter and the Ziono-Hollywoodist Conspiracy'. In brief: Potterverse magic = 'witchcraft and brainwashing' = 'evil essence of Zionism', because witchcraft was invented by 'rabbis of ancient Egypt'. (Harvard MESH) Yes, it's *The Protocols of the Elders of Hogwarts*.

Christopher Priest was named winner of the European SF Society Grand Master award at Eurocon 2009 in Italy. Ansible Link: 'May we start calling you Emeritus?' CP: 'A mere "Grand" will do.'

Martin Amis and Howard Jacobson revealed their unique stature in comedy: "You see before you the last two comic British novelists," Amis announced. "If I had to pick three pieces of prose to make you laugh," Jacobson said, "one would be by Martin and the other two would be mine." (*Guardian*) Reader's letter one week

later: 'Someone tell them that it's OK, they can relax: Terry Pratchett is still here. In fact, elsewhere in the same week's news, he was at Buckingham Palace, being knighted for services to literature.'

Arthur C. Clarke Award shortlist: Ian R. MacLeod, *Song of Time*; Paul McAuley, *The Quiet War*; Alastair Reynolds, *House of Suns*; Neal Stephenson, *Anathem*; Sheri S. Tepper, *The Margarets*; Mark Wernham, *Martin Martin's on the Other Side*.

Solaris, Games Workshop's sf/fantasy imprint, is up for sale. All scheduled titles will appear up to early 2010.

Don't Call It Siffy. The US Sci-Fi Channel is rebranding as Syfy, since its content 'is broader than traditional science fiction.' (*TV Week*) ('The professional wrestling, for example, is pure fantasy.') Tactful explanation from TV historian Tim Brooks: 'The name Sci Fi has been associated with geeks and dysfunctional, antisocial boys in their basements with video games and stuff like that, as opposed to the general public and the female audience in particular.' Digging ever deeper, he added: 'We spent a lot of time in the '90s trying to distance the network from science fiction, which is largely why it's called Sci Fi.' The Channel's own ad agency disclaimed all responsibility for a brandname increasingly beset by syphilis jokes: 'SyFy was a name generated internally and pretested at the channel...'

Stephen King assessed fellow-writers. Harry Potter vs. Twilight: 'The real difference is that Jo Rowling is a terrific writer and Stephenie Meyer can't write worth a darn ... She's not very good.' Also, Dean Koontz is 'sometimes ... just awful.' (Philly.com)

Nebula Awards novel shortlist: Cory Doctorow, *Little Brother*; Ursula K. Le Guin, *Powers*; Jack McDevitt, *Cauldron*; Ian McDonald, *Brasyl*; Terry Pratchett, *Making Money*; David J. Schwartz, *Superpowers*.

Adam Roberts, addressing the audience at the 'Great Gollancz QUIZ', did not mince words: 'I love you all ... because I've had a lot of free beer.' (*Bookseller*)

No Sex Please, We're Fannish. 'I'm not afraid of sex, it's just not something I want

to do. That's probably why I delve into the world of science fiction and Transformers, where sex isn't an issue at all.' (*Independent* feature on asexuality, or 'syfy' as it is known)

Will F. Jenkins is remembered in Virginia, whose state legislature passed a resolution commending the sf he wrote as Murray Leinster and designating 27 June 2009 as Will F. Jenkins Day.

Harlan Ellison ('Doctor, I have this terrible sense of *déjà vu*.') is again suing CBS-Paramount over non-payment for exploitation of his *Star Trek* episode 'City on the Edge of Forever'. Also named in the suit, for persistent failure to act on his behalf, is the Writers Guild of America – with a token claim of one dollar. (*Deadline Hollywood Daily*)

Thog's Masterclass. *Gut Feelings Dept.* 'The small sound from deep in her throat jerked

open Grisha's gut anger.' 'Small angry teeth bit inside his gut. They chewed at him a great deal these days.' 'The tiny teeth bit so hard in his stomach that he groaned aloud.' 'Pain vomited through him and he screamed.' (all Stoney Compton, *Russian Amerika*, 2007) • *Mental Gymnastics Dept.* 'The gentle voice [...] droned on and on until each repetition seemed to trampoline into the gray matter of my mind.' (Anne McCaffrey, *Restoree*, 1967) • *Dept of Emotional Diagnosis.* 'My face drew back from my skull as if I were vomiting and tears ran from my eyes like blood from gashes. I was sad –' (Neal Stephenson, *Anathem*, 2008) • *House of Flying Digits Dept.* 'He hurled his pointing finger at Gizamon, then pounded his fist on his chest.' (Laura Joh Rowland, *The Snow Empress*, 2007) [TAG] • *Dept of Too Much Vindaloo.* 'She was a human arrow, burning flames at both ends, fired toward a single purpose.' (*Ibid*)

R • I • P

Dave Arneson (1947–2009), co-creator with the late Gary Gygax of *Dungeons and Dragons*, died from cancer on 7 April; he was 61.

J.G. Ballard (1930–2009), who needs no introduction, died from cancer on 19 April; he was 78. His remarkable short stories of the late 50s and early 60s, infused with surrealism and offbeat psychology, rearranged the spectrum of sf possibilities. Memorable novels followed, moving from the poetic sf of *The Drowned World* (1962) and *The Crystal World* (1966) to the controversial, near-mainstream *Crash* (1973) and a bestselling fictionalization of his childhood in wartime Shanghai, *Empire of the Sun* (1984). At his best he depth-charged our minds with unforgettable imagery.

Michael Cox (1948–2009), UK biographer, novelist and horror critic who edited *The Oxford Book of English Ghost Stories* (1986 with R.A. Gilbert) and other Oxford genre anthologies, died in late March.

Chester D. Cuthbert (1912–2009), Canadian member of First Fandom whose fiction debut was in Hugo Gernsback's *Wonder Stories* in 1934, died on 20 March;

he was 96.

Philip José Farmer (1918–2009), long-time US sf author and another who needs no introduction, died on 25 February; he celebrated his 91st birthday on 26 January. He won Hugos as Most Promising New Author in 1953, following his pioneering alien-sex story 'The Lovers' (1952); for 'Riders of the Purple Wage' in *Dangerous Visions* (1967); and for *To Your Scattered Bodies Go* (1971), opening the popular Riverworld series. He was perhaps best loved for the exuberant science-fantasies of his World of Tiers, beginning with *The Maker of Universes* (1965). In 2001, SFWA honoured him as a Grand Master.

John Kennedy (1945–2009), US author (central to the Colorado sf workshop) who published a handful of sf stories over four decades – the first in *Galaxy* in 1976 – died on 18 March aged 63.

Edward Upward (1903–2009), UK writer whose work (including the Mortmere stories, with Christopher Isherwood) was often touched with surreal fantasy, died on 13 February. At 105 he was Britain's oldest living author.

Readers' Poll Results compiled by Martin McGrath

Martin McGrath: The number of voters was down slightly on last year but the number of positive votes rose sharply while negative voting fell back, leading to a much higher ratio of positive to negative votes suggesting *Interzone* must be doing something right – at least as far as respondents to the poll are concerned.

The number of stories with negative aggregate votes continued to fall so that this year there was just one story in that category. Chris Beckett might have got a special issue to himself but his three stories managed to attract the highest number of negative votes for a single author – with 'Poppyfields' particularly splitting voters.

Once again, however, all of the stories published in 2008 attracted at least one positive vote and the number of stories that got no negative votes at all rose to seven (from four last year).

At the top of the poll Jason Sanford is the clear winner with the most popular story of all ('When Thorns are the Tips of Trees' from issue 219) and another story ('The Ships Like Clouds, Risen by Their Rain' from issue 217) at number four. He managed to see off Mercurio D. Rivera's 'The Scent of Their Arrival' in a close fought race at the top of the pile. Greg Egan's 'Crystal Nights' (issue 215) placed third and Chris Beckett's 'Greenland' (issue 218) filled out the top five.

Issue 217 was the most popular issue. The Mundane-SF issue 216 fared less well, limping in last.

The art vote was marginally higher than last year but exceptionally close. 'Traveller', Kenn Brown's cover to issue 219, came out on top by virtue of having one more positive vote than six rivals on the same aggregate score. For the first time since art was included in the *Interzone* ballot the interior art challenged the covers for attention and Vincent Chong's work on 'The Ships Like Clouds...' (issue 217), Paul Drummond's on 'Little Lost Robot' (issue 217) and Warwick Fraser-Coombe's on 'Corner of the Circle' (issue 218) were tied with the covers of issue 218 (Warwick Fraser-Coombe) and issue 216 (Chris Nurse) for joint second place. Overall, Paul Drummond's artwork attracted the highest number of votes.

Thanks once again to Martin and everyone who voted, and congratulations to the winners and runners up in both categories.

Stephen Tollyfield: I rediscovered *Interzone* in 2008. I had given up in the early 2000s. I did not appreciate the full colour editions. The magazine seemed overblown – style over substance – and the content too influenced by *The Third Alternative*. I bought issue 217 from my local newsstand – reassured by the look and feel. I was however nearly put off completely by the first story I read, 'The Two-Headed Girl'. However the rest of the stories were all good. I particularly enjoyed 'Concession Girl' which was a strong story in a proper SciFi setting. Even better was 'Ships Like Clouds Risen by Their Rain' by Jason Sanford, which was just wonderful in that weird but lyrical way.

Issue 218: As a long-time *Interzone* reader the Chris Beckett issue was well received. 'Greenland' was clearly the best story – and a great cover. Issue 219 was not so good and I really did not care for 'The Shenu'. Jason Sanford's second story, 'When Thorns are the Tips of Trees', was again the best story. If you continue to publish SF with genuine emotional content from authors I've never read before then I'll keep buying.

Doug Anderson: A good year for *Interzone*. I could have voted for many more stories but instead picked my favourites.

Dave Lee: Another resounding year for you. The Mundane SF issue was great, though I think it's all a matter of taste. Since the age of 18 I've reached for my blaster when I see 'Third in a Ten-novel Series' or titles that tell me there's sword and sorcery within. Keep 'em coming!

JKV: I didn't see much difference between issue 216 and other issues, despite the Mundane theme. Maybe you tend to print a lot of Mundane SF anyway. You seem to take more risks than other SF magazines, and that, more than anything, is what makes it worthwhile for me. I'd definitely rather read a singular and surprising story than a well-crafted but trite one. Thanks for an amazing year!

Piet Wenings: Three more positives than in 2007, so we're back at the 2006 level. Jason Stoddard, Aliette de Bodard and Will McIntosh appeal to me. They were in my positive list of 2007 and 2008 sees them returning. So please keep spots open for them in *Interzone*! Two fewer negative votes than last year. And there are always great issues: 217 was the stand-out this year, closely followed by 214. Wouldn't miss it for the world.

By keeping track of the *Interzone* stories, I'm also keeping track of my tastes. I've decided to be a little bit more enthusiastic when I felt really good or worried or confused after reading a story. Things that really annoy me are Deus Ex Machinas or endings that keep you guessing, but actually unconcerned about the problem (not) solved. So for next year I hope to be able to add stand-outs (extreme positives). Eugie Foster's story in issue 220 is an example of this. The first hit of 2009!

Chris Geeson: I first discovered the work of Chris Beckett in *Interzone* a few years ago and have been a fan ever since – so I was delighted to find that issue 218 was something of a Chris Beckett special. Another highlight of the year was R.R. Angell's story, 'Remote Control', which must be among my favourite IZ stories of all time.

Scott Beeler: 'Concession Girl' is my favourite of the year. The mix of serious mystery with a good amount of quirky and comedic elements, plus nice world building and character portrayals (human and alien) blends really well to form an all-around tremendously entertaining story. It's very difficult to get all of those different elements right at the same time but Suzanne Palmer does it in this story.

Duncan Brack: I've never actually voted before, but I enjoyed 'His Master's Voice' in issue 218 so much I thought I needed to – if I could give it triple marks I would! Please can we have more writing like this? Interesting and fairly complex plot (given the length of the story), and tight, effective writing.

Rowan Collins: As a subscriber only since Christmas 2007, I must say I've been very impressed with the standard of stories in *Interzone*, and looking at my own list of favourites, it seems like I should be voting for practically everything! I've also very much

enjoyed the artwork and editorial content – I look forward each issue to the ‘As Others See Us’ and ‘Thog’s Masterclass’ items, for a start.

The thing I’ve been less impressed with, overall, is the reviews section, which seems somehow less polished than the rest. Not strictly in the period of this poll, but in the first issue I received, #213, was a review by John Clute which had an impenetrable sentence lasting more than 120 words. By the time I reached the last phrase – ‘transpontine longings’ – I had already come to the conclusion that this was not someone I would trust to judge literature, and gave up trying to understand him. Later, in issue #219, I came upon Tony Lee’s review of *The Colour of Magic* on DVD, which began with the assertion that “I’m not a Discworld fan,” and proceeded to dismiss Pratchett’s entire oeuvre. I don’t know if it’s illustrative or just unfortunate, but another review in #219 had a summary listing two Best SF anthologies, but as far as I can see only actually reviewed one of them. **[This review, Rowan, is of one book that has two editions, one published in the UK and the other in the USA. We listed the details of each edition, intending to be helpful. Sorry for the confusion!]**

But I hate to end on a negative note, so please take these comments in a spirit of constructive criticism, and, above all, keep up the good work! Thanks again for a great magazine, and I look forward to more great stuff in the year ahead!

Rainer Graf-Hickel: I am a subscriber from issue 217 on. As general praise for your magazine, I must say I really love *Interzone* already, its great stories and its design. ‘Ansible Link’ is always very entertaining and witty. I am really disappointed that there’s nothing comparable in Germany. But I found *Interzone* – really great!!!!

Robert Lawson: Kurt Vonnegut wrote in the introduction to his collection *Bagombo Snuff Box* a few pointers on how to craft a short story. Number 1 on his list was never to waste the readers’ time. *Interzone* has nailed that one and then some. It’s been an excellent year. I won’t ramble on about variety of tone, length, plot etc making each issue worth a re-read – even though it’s true – but I’ll just quickly throw in the observation that any publication offering ‘How To Make Paper Airplanes’, ‘The Two-Headed Girl’ and ‘Corner of the Circle’ to readers in consecutive issues deserves to be applauded.

Anticipating the poll this year I tried to think of stories which had not only entertained but also given me something to think about other than fixing the dishwasher (again). The best of the year was the previously mentioned ‘The Two-Headed Girl’ which stayed with me for weeks. As with last year’s ‘Molly and the Red Hat’ we’ve been given a compelling piece of imaginative fiction with wonderful set pieces, strong character dynamics and plain damn weirdness. Just how I like it. Not that I expect ‘The Two-Headed Girl’ to top this year’s poll. That honour will probably go to the accomplished Mercurio D. Rivera who certainly knows how to tell a good story well. There are too many to mention in detail but other favourites of mine include ‘When Thorns are the Tips of Trees’, ‘Dragonfly Summer’, ‘Corner of the Circle’ and ‘How To Make Paper Airplanes’.

For every tick there’s a tock. Disappointed with a below par effort from Jamie Barras with ‘The Endling’. This wasn’t up to his (admittedly high) standards. The following will appear a contradiction I know having included ‘How To Make Paper Airplanes’ as a favourite but the Mundane Issue wasn’t the best IZ ever was it? And as an advertising tool I wouldn’t think to attract a fickle reading public into my pages by screaming that I’m a common, ordinary, banal, unimaginative special issue. But hey it still passes KV’s number 1.

Best cover of the year was issue 218. It was twelve months ago when I enthused over Warwick Fraser-Coombe’s artwork and he’s only enhanced his reputation this year. Maybe he can see he’s got a challenger in Daniel Bristow-Bailey. The only artwork tock was the absence of David Gentry. I hope it wasn’t anything I said last year.

To finish I’d like to say thanks for the R.I.P. notice for David Foster Wallace. Brilliant does not go too far when describing his work. *Infinite Jest* should be experienced by any self respecting bibliophilic chancer.

Thanks for a great time.

Paul Evans: Reviewing last year’s issues, I realised just how high the standard is in *Interzone*. Lots of great stories with issue 219 my highlight. There were a few stories that didn’t do it for me, but no stinkers, so I’m not going to vote against anything.

Thanks to the whole team: keep up the good work!

STORY

1 When Thorns are the Tips of Trees

Jason Sanford

2 The Scent of Their Arrival

Mercurio D. Rivera

3 Crystal Nights

Greg Egan

4 The Ships Like Clouds, Risen by Their Rain

Jason Sanford

5 Greenland

Chris Beckett

6 Concession Girl

Suzanne Palmer

7 Little Lost Robot

Paul McAuley

8 His Master’s Voice

Hannu Rajaniemi

9 Africa

Karen Fishler

10 Butterfly, Falling at Dawn

Aliette de Bodard

11 Everything That Matters

Jeff Spock

12 Remote Control

R.R. Angell

13 The Country of the Young

Gord Sellar

14 The Fifth Zhi

Mercurio D. Rivera

15 Comus of Central Park

M.K. Hobson

16 Far Horizon

Jason Stoddard

17 IF

Daniel Akselrod & Lenny Royter

18 Street Hero

Will McIntosh

19 The Two-Headed Girl

Paul G. Tremblay

20 Endra – From Memory

Chelsea Quinn Yarbrow

ART

1 Traveller (219 cover)

Kenn Brown

2 The Ships Like Clouds, Risen by Their Rain (217 illustration)

Vincent Chong

3 Little Lost Robot (217 illustration)

Paul Drummond

4 Corner of the Circle (218 illustration)

Warwick Fraser-Coombe

5 Greenland (218 cover)

Warwick Fraser-Coombe

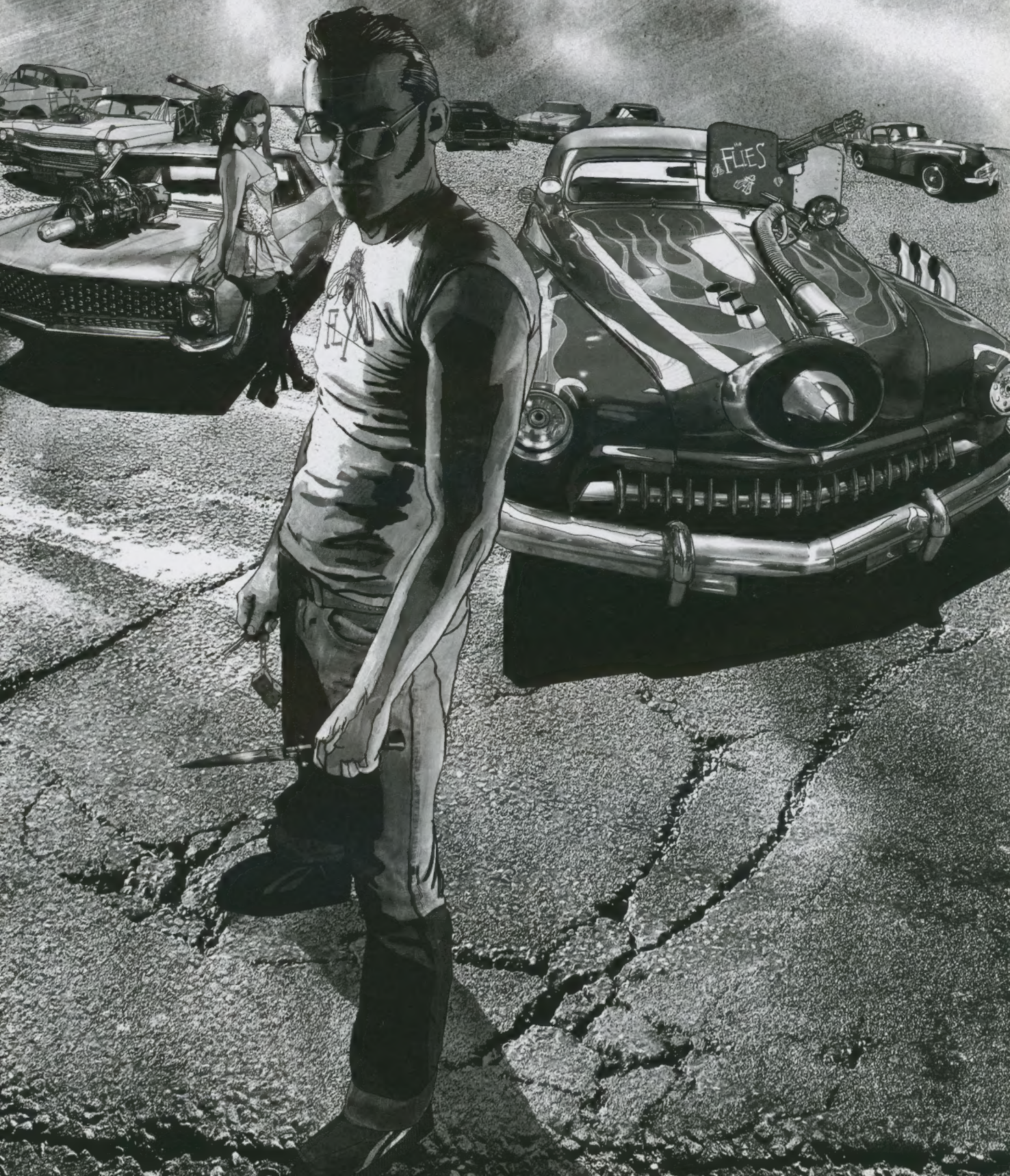
6 Mundane-SF Issue (216 cover)

Christopher Nurse

7 Far Horizon (214 cover)

Paul Drummond

JOHNNY AND EMMIE-LOU CET



MARRIED BY KIM LAKIN-SMITH

ILLUSTRATED BY WARWICK FRASER-COOMBE

First off we had to get to the church. Emmie-Lou in her Poodle skirt, tight sweater, bobby socks, and high tail. Me in thick-cuffed Levis, white vest, black hair – soaked and scooped in pomade – and a pair of devilish, twelve-inch creepers. Emmie-Lou's white dress was in the back. *Don't get it creased, Johnny.* I wouldn't get it creased. Couldn't say the same for my shirt, crumpled up on the back seat of my Chevy Bel Air like a used pack of smokes. I never was one to waste energy on threads.

Billy revved his Daimler Dart, and, yeah, it had a dirty throat but that machine was wired. It might have been dark, but the gas lamps that lined the street lit up every inch. The engine had been cranked proud of the bonnet like a sprawling heart of chrome. Four silver pendulum arms rotated, appearing to drive a colossal tick tock movement connected to the drive shaft. Pipework wormed in amongst the gristle of the engine, or beanstalked over the roof. The boiler squatted up back in its studded metal jacket. Now and then, a rack of variegated piston valves let off bursts of steam.

I swallowed. Billy's Dart was one fat cat and Emmie-Lou was the cream.

Hell wasn't she! I eyeballed the dips, hips and lips of the Rocketeers' top doll, a paper shaker at Franklin High who wore team ribbons in her hair and was all but wed to Billy. Problem was Emmie-Lou didn't want what Billy was offering. She might've been born on the east side, which made her Rocketeer to the bone, but that didn't stop her from being real gone on a Fly. Real gone on me.

Except, in Dragsville, a Fly and a Rocketeer didn't go together. Each gang had its own part of town, way to fight, favoured machines and gene pool. Muddle the DNA and both sides took exception, the Flies by repossessing my glider wings and suckers, the Rocketeers by riding my thieving ass out of town. Or at least trying to. Truth was, I'd turn Jock before I'd abandon the blue-eyed baby riding beside me.

I shot Emmie-Lou a look made up of all the good stuff I felt inside. We'd been jacketed ever since we first spied each other in the school yard, her with a mouthful of Popsicle, me with a match hanging off my lip and a switchblade in my pocket. She'd flickered into view like the gasses streaming out of the open blower of my Chevy. Emmie-Lou; blackest hair, true-blue peepers, and a cupid's bow you could hook your mouth around and never let go of. For me, the deal was sealed there and then. As for Emmie-Lou, she'd stared right on back. I guess she must've liked what she saw.

Widening my nostrils, I sucked in the scent of her. Emmie-Lou had claws, curves, and a smell on her like cream doughnuts and summertime sweat – which was how she was two months gone, and why we were church bound. All I had to do was get us there, and whip Billy's ass in a race to Sinners' Square in the process.

Rocketeers caged us in on three sides. Behind us, the gang's elite were holed up in their Daimlers, AC Aces, bullet-nosed Studebakers, and Nash-Healey's – coupes that gleamed with aluminium trim, rear-mounted water tanks, and every sort of billet. The remainder loitered on the sidewalk, or, to be exact, hovered above the concrete, mist shooting down from the twin pipes of their body-moulded backpacks. My one-time gang, the Flies were nowhere to be seen. All that stood between me and oblivion was the girl riding shotgun at my side and the steel wings of my Chevy.

A doll in skin-tight pants and a cherry patterned halter sidled out to the middle of the strip. She peeled a red ribbon out of her high tail and raised her arm. The Dart worked up thick blow-backs of steam. I held the Chevy on a knife's edge.

The instant the doll let go of the ribbon, I mashed the loud pedal. Grit whipped off the Chevy's steelies despite its locker. Reflected in the rear view, flames splurged out of the exhaust. And then the torque had me, moulding my spine back into the seat. In those first few seconds, Billy was just a bad taste in an otherwise lip-smacking cocktail of speed and adrenalin. The strip ahead was deserted, could've stretched for miles for all I cared. Emmie-Lou was a sweet knot of breath at my side. The Chevy parted the air like silk.

Then Billy rumbled up to my left shoulder. Tucking in my chin, I glanced sideways to see Billy smiling back, his starched white collar angled like a fin.

My gaze flicked up to the rear view. Rocketeers buzzed at our back ends. That's when she spoke, my blue-eyed baby, my Emmie-Lou.

"Give 'em hell, Johnny." Leaning over, she touched her tongue's tip to my ear – just as Billy must've popped the seal on the steam feed to give his Dart a swollen belly. His vehicle shot ahead on a meaty belch of cooling air. Simultaneously, the Chevy lurched. Emmie-Lou's mouth ricocheted off my skull. She fell back into her seat as we were wrenched high at the bumper, the front two steelies screaming in futile rotation.

"Billy's got us on a leash." I bit down on the words as the chain connecting the two machines whipped taut. Billy snaked his Dart from one side of the strip to the other, and I'd a good idea why. Sooner or later, the momentum would build, allowing Billy to release the hook-up and send us slamming into any of the derelict warehouses that walled us in on either side. It was a dirty game, would've worked too if it hadn't been for the fresh hydraulics I'd installed two weeks earlier.

Glancing at Emmie-Lou, I registered the smear of blood where she'd hit her bottom lip on my hard head. My heart strings cramped.

"Fasten yourself in."

She did just that. I swiped a hand across the bank of switches

on the dash.

Time folded as the front of the Chevy jackknifed, a 72 volt system working off the twelve batteries underpinning the low-rider's underbelly. The four corners of the vehicle shot up then dipped. I snapped more switches. The Chevy's entire body leapt skyward, pitched front then back, and juddered down on dumping cylinders. We left the ground every few seconds, our crazed bunny hop transforming that colossal machine into a thing of flesh and metal.

Somewhere along the line, Billy lost his hold on us. I dragged the Chevy's arse off a curb, showering the streets in sparks off the scrape plate.

"Okay, baby?"

Emmie-Lou was hot in the eyes. "You always were a wild ride, Johnny."

I pinned up a corner of my mouth. "About to get wilder." A swirling fish bowl of a water tank reflected in the rear view; I'd plumbed it into the stretched bumper to even out the weight. Cranking a lever, I drew on that reservoir now to power the twin guns at the Chevy's backend, flipped a switch and uncapped the cut-outs. The black shark roared.

Billy dove left then right. I aimed dead ahead. Billy's Dart had the pretty face of a pro street dragster but my Chevy had lungs on it. The black shell hunkered down on an open-wheel chassis, 34-inch skins bolted on either side while the rear wheels tucked in at the tail where the fibreglass had been tubbed to accommodate them. Downshifting, I yanked a steel handle in the roof, stoked the engine then floored it. We streaked past Billy's Daimler in an explosion of blue-black flames.

The street widened out into four lanes. No traffic, which was understandable; it was Rebel's Hour, those sixty minutes before dawn when the good folk snoozed like babies in their cradles and only cats and hobos inhabited the city. And the racers. I tucked in my shoulders as if to streamline everything that could create resistance. In Dragsville there was always some punk wanted to race you.

Right that second, it was a blonde flattop called Billy, who just happened to be one of the founding members of the Rocketeers. We'd never see eye to eye, Billy and me, and not just because his crew terrorised the neighbourhood, flying in at unlatched windows to steal a honey or a wallet, or dumping fistfuls of nails onto the streets below, a helluva slice of rain. No, the truth of it was that Billy and I were the bovver boys of our tribes, destined to clash skulls no matter the subject. But while we were extremists, I'd strayed that bit too far for the Flies. Now I was on my own.

Billy shifted in real close; if I hadn't got chrome nerf bars mounted wide either side of the Chevy's skirts, he'd have scuffed me up good. As it was, I kept my eyes on the cool grey slip of road and the clock tower of the church as it peeled into view.

"You ain't got Billy licked 'til we're wed, Johnny," Emmie-Lou stated, breathless and wide-eyed.

"I know, baby. He'll never stop hammering us 'til that band of gold's wrapped around your finger. But don't doubt me now, Emmie-Lou."

"Never could, never would," she smouldered, but I caught a glint of fear in her eyes.

She was right to be spooked. Billy had found his speed again,

elbowing in as we turned off 99th Street and into Sinner's Square. The track narrowed, our machines swerving in to buddy up on the Inner Circular. In that same instant, something slammed the Chevy's roof, prompting my best girl to throw up her hands like a scream queen. I pinched up my eyes. A second clang reverberated, shaking my nerve; it sounded like the fist of an iron man. Then I heard the hiss of steam, not the piped flux that powered the stomach of my machine, but a rent in its mechanism...or, to be specific, a crack in the squat, rear-mounted boiler. I rapped the Speedo with my knuckles. Five miniature dials whirled and continued to lose momentum. One glance at the rear view confirmed the worst of it; the boiler was weeping hot green water onto the road, the misted tank starting to clear as it cooled to reveal one hell of a splinter.

It was the third strike which shook me back to my fighting best. I drew wide, sucking in the belly of the Chevy to ease up onto the sidewalk and narrowly avoid the stalks of the gas lights. Glancing over, I saw a hammer arm wielding a tremendous steel wrecking ball at the rear of the Dart. How the weight of the thing didn't roll that coupe was anyone's guess, but Billy had always been the physicist. Meanwhile, I was just a grease monkey...I was also the better driver. There was one chance and one chance only to end the thing well, at least for me and Emmie-Lou. I crushed the brake. Cranking the suicide knob hard to the right, I swung the Chevy between two gas lights and back out onto the track immediately in the shadow of the Dart. I caught Billy's face ghosting his rear view. No two eyes had ever shone as cold.

"Gonna ride your back, Billy," I shot beneath my breath. My fingers swept the bank of switches at the dash, closed around and depressed a lever by my thigh. A final blast of steam punched in to fire up the hydraulics. The front two corners of the Chevy dipped way low. Then we kicked off a full two metres clear of the strip, stomachs tumbling, blood roaring in our skulls.

The landing was sweet and tough by equal measure; sweet to feel the reverb as the Chevy hit the Dart hard across the shoulders, steelies revving off the wide-bottomed boiler to send us flying out over Billy's head to crash down out in front; tough because I heard the stunt take its toll on the ride that had cost me three years working the pumps at Mickey's Garage. I flicked the steering, then hit it hard to the left, the Chevy clawing its way into a bootlegger and coming to rest alongside the church door. The Dart slammed in hard to the black shark's trunk. Steam filled the air like a pea soup.

I leant across and unbuckled Emmie-Lou's seat belt.

"Think you can run now, Emmie-Lou?"

"Sure thing, Johnny."

"Then grab that pretty frock of yours and let's get us to a preacher."

"Just one problem, Johnny." Emmie-Lou's face drained of all shades of cream and roses. "Billy's at the window and he's tout-ing a blade."

Nothing to worry about, my blue-eyed baby. Let me deal with the bad dog at the door. Let me take the knife for you. Let me carry the weight. Out loud, I said, "So Billy's not gonna give it up 'til blood's spilt. Okay then."

Emmie-Lou's hand was a branding iron at my forearm. I smiled at her with my eyes, then cranked the door handle, slid

out a boot, crunched down on a stone as I rose, and eased out. "Get dressed," I said last thing and shut Emmie-Lou in.

Billy was fired up. Spit escaped out a corner of his mouth as he breathed hard. His eyes stayed cold though. He rocked side to side on spread feet, one hand out for balance, the other clenching the blade. I kept my silverware hid in my palm; I trusted the catch to spring open inside a second. It'd been tripped enough times to keep it fit for purpose.

"Least you didn't end up in the weeds, Billy." I fixed on him grimly. "What's more, I ain't hunting pink slips. Dart's yours, and to pay the necessary, it's a helluva blower. But my Chevy won the race fair and square. Time for you and me to part ways."

"And Emmie-Lou?" Billy tugged on his collar, its stiffness etched on his face.

"Knocked up. Part Fly, part Rocketeer, our rug rat's gonna be a mutant by both gang's standards, a kid who can't fit, no way no how." I eased back against the still-warm Chevy, cocked my head and squinted at Billy. I squeezed out a drop of true feeling. "I'd give up my pink slips for that runt, for its blue-eyed mamma too."

In those last few moments between end of Rebel's Hour and dawn, Billy squinted over, the smallest trace of understanding at his lips. The seed of a smile grew up at the edges, and I saw then that it was anything but friendly. I was suddenly aware of the dark shapes of a hundred or more Rocketeers' machines at my back, their engines idling. The occasional spurt of steam was a bleak reminder of the gang members hovering nearby. I tensed my hand around the blade. Billy kept on smiling.

Emmie-Lou startled the pair of us. The door handle clunked and she started to emerge, white silk frothing at her ankles. I glanced at her with a blaze of yearning, just as Billy stepped forward and slid in the knife.

For an instant, she was soft, doused in scent and yielding. Then the blood began to seep through her dress. My flesh felt as if it were scorched off my bones. Devil's mercy, the ache! So much gut wrenching pain as my girl stumbled backwards from both Billy and me, and up onto the church steps where a preacher stood, dressed head to toe in black and condemnation. He caught Emmie-Lou as she fell, manoeuvred the both of them down onto the steps and sat, cradling her head like a child's.

I turned towards the Chevy. Staring at my reflection in the driver side window, I contemplated who was real that instant, the torn man on the sidewalk or the two-dimensional figure in the glass. A second later, I span around, blade unsheathed.

The slash to Billy's throat was deep, neat and designed to drain life quickly. He made a motion as if to come for me, but I was already striding away. Billy was done for. He just didn't realise it yet.

Dawn stripped the layers of night from the sky. I fell to my knees on the first step. It was more than I dared do to disturb Emmie-Lou, cradled safely as she was in the arms of a better man. Out of the corner of my eye, I registered Billy stagger in my direction before he fell face forward, his blood greasing the strip like a skid mark. The air was thick with noise as the Rocketeers flocked.

No matter. If there was no Emmie-Lou, I'd slip the blade between my own ribs.

"Johnny," she whispered.

I leant in, trembling.

"It's not over 'til we're wed."

Agony dug in at my forehead. "They're coming for me, Emmie-Lou. There ain't time."

"You promised, Johnny. You, me, and the babe. Said, together, we're gonna see this jacked up world reborn."

Her words were an adrenalin shot to the heart. I stood up slowly. "Start reading, preacher."

The man glanced at me. My expression must have been crazed enough to convince him.

"Dearly beloved. We are gathered here today..." His voice was a dark scrape of sound.

I met Emmie-Lou's gaze. She seemed less substantial then, like a figure cut from burnout and reminding me of how she'd looked on the day that we first met.

"Do you take this woman..."

"Hell, yeah!" *I'd try my best, Emmie-Lou.* But there'd be no reaching the end of this marriage service for me. Scaring my mind with her fading image, I turned back around to face the street.

In their slim-cut suits, white and ghoulish green starched shirts, Chelsea boots, and steam-powered backpacks, the Rocketeers edged in, the hard gleam of hatred in their eyeballs. Blades flicked out from palms and pockets. Time bled away. I was breathing stolen air.

It was a stiff metallic crunch followed by the hiss of ebbing pressure in miniaturised hydraulics that alerted me to the swarm overhead. They came now, a thousand Flies, tumbling down from the bell tower in zigzagging, jagged motion. I watched them punch the long iron candy canes of their suckers hard against the brick, depress levers in each palm to release the gas, then freefall. I remembered that great rush of air and disconnection from the earth, and it flooded me with awe and sorrow.

Having pleated their suckers into half-a-metre long cylinders stored at their backs, other hundreds of Flies blackened the skies. Landing on the sidewalk in-between me and the hordes of Rocketeers, the gang members lowered their arms, concertinaed their canvas glider wings into the back pouch in their leather, and drew out their suckers from the sheaths at their spines. They whipped the skull-crushing iron canes out to their full extension; steam oozed from the tips.

I sat down as Emmie-Lou said, "I do." Retrieving the band of gold from a jeans' pocket, I slipped it onto her finger. Then I scooped her out of the preacher's arms and pressed her body hard to mine to stem her wound.

Flames of hazy sunlight filled the streets. All around us, two gangs slugged it out for control of the strips in Dragsville. Inside my best girl, a babe kept on growing in the muddled image of a Rocketeer and a Fly.

Kim Lakin-Smith is a science fiction and dark fantasy author whose obsessions include hot rods, steampunk, urban dystopias, and dirty rock'n'roll. Her debut novel *Tourniquet* was published by Immanion Press in 2007 and she has had short stories published in several anthologies and magazines, including *Celebration*, the BSFA's 50th birthday anthology, the Myth-Understandings women writers' anthology, *All Hallows* magazine, and others. This is her first appearance in *Interzone*. Kim is also a regular guest speaker at writing workshops and conventions. Visit her website at kimlakin-smith.com.

unexpected

BY TIM PRATT

I was lying in bed with my girlfriend Heather that Tuesday morning in September when the phone rang, early. We didn't jump to answer it – that's what machines are for – and after a couple of rings and the beep we heard our friend Sherman, sounding excited, say, "Guys, you should turn on your TV."

We didn't get up right away. It was early, only about 6 a.m. in California, and though the phone had awakened us, we sprawled languidly entangled for a while. "Hey," she said. "He didn't say what channel. What could have happened, that it would be on every channel?"

I thought about it for a minute. "Aliens," I said. I was seven-eighths joking, but I was always a science fiction fan – yeah, that's a laugh now, isn't it? – and I kind of half hoped maybe I was right. Aliens. "We come in peace," I said.

She sighed. "I wish. It's probably an assassination."

"Probably." Nearly a year after the election, we were still pissed about Gore losing the presidency he'd rightfully won, about the Supreme Court deciding they knew better than the people. Maybe somebody even more pissed off than us had decided to do something about Bush Jr., but really, Cheney in charge would have been even worse.

We finally got up, and went into the living room in our robes, and turned on the TV...and saw what all the rest of you in the television-owning world saw.

I know it's a cliché, but it's a cliché for a reason: 9/11 changed everything.

The talking heads on screen were pretty much yelling, but we didn't listen, just stared at the impossible image on the screen. A jetliner – a Boeing 767-223ER, we learned later – hanging perfectly still in the air, so close to the side of one of the World Trade Center towers that someone could have leaned out the window of an office and laid her hand on the jet's nose (if the windows up that high opened, anyway). The plane was suspended impossibly in the sky, like a special effect in a movie about a kid with a magical wristwatch that stops time. But even though the first thought everyone had on seeing the plane was "This is like something out of a movie," it wasn't a movie.

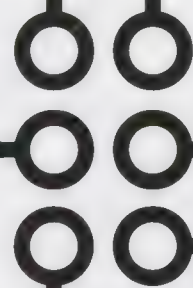
"Tim," Heather said. "Is it...some kind of publicity thing? Or like a David Copperfield magician trick? Or..."

I flipped channels. The same images were on all the channels, the same repeating camera angles, from helicopters, from the ground – only the yelling was different. "I don't think –" I began, and then the second plane entered the frame from the left, cruising along the skyline with the easy grace of a shark, seeming to move deceptively slowly, and I braced myself, expecting it to slam into the Trade Center's second tower. Reporters on the ground stopped yelling and started screaming.

But the plane just stopped, and hung there, nose tipped at a slight angle, mere feet from the side of the building.

And that's when the figure – the one people call the Ambassador, or the Doctor, or the Outsider, or the Professor, or a hundred other names – appeared. Just a middle-aged man in a white lab coat, with steel-rimmed glasses and graying hair. His image filled the air above the jetliner, like the dome of the sky had been transformed into an IMAX movie screen, which only added to the sense of special-effects-laden unreality. "What's he saying?" Heather asked, the same thing the reporters on the ground were saying, and it was a moment before his moving lips synched up with booming sound.

outcomes



He said, "People of Earth, I have a message for you."

"Hi there," a voice said from the far side of our living room. We wrenched around on the couch and saw a man sitting on the stained old loveseat left behind by a prior tenant.

"Who the fuck are you? Get out of here!" We lived in a lousy part of town near 40th and Telegraph Ave., over by the MacArthur BART commuter train station, and there were times we couldn't come in through our front gate because the cops had drug dealers handcuffed and sitting on the sidewalk in the way, so a crazy homeless guy sneaking into our living room seemed plausible.

But my girlfriend put her hand on my arm and said, "Tim, that's the guy from the TV."

I settled back down, though I was hardly comforted. She was right, though – same glasses, same lab coat, same vaguely affable expression.

"People of...this house," he said. "I have a message for you."

Later we heard about how he'd appeared all over the world, in everybody's living room, or hut, or yurt, or bathysphere, or mountaintop temple, or patch of dirt. Sometimes he was a white guy in a lab coat, sometimes he was a black guy in a three-piece suit, sometimes he was a woman in a headscarf, sometimes he was a god – he looked different to everyone, and even his image in the sky over the WTC didn't look the same to all the people there. But his message was pretty much the same for everyone. I wonder about those uncontacted, remote tribes in Papua New Guinea and the South American rain forests – how did he explain the situation to *them*, when they had no technological context for understanding? Or do those undiscovered peoples even exist, here, since they aren't part of the global community, since they were utterly unaffected by the Age of Global Terror – were they outside the bounds of the study? Maybe Dawson and I should look into it, though jungle exploring is a little tricky these days, unless you find the right hole.

"You have been participants in a long-running and very successful historical and sociological study," Professor Apocalypse said. "And that study has now come to an end." He gestured at the TV screen. "In actual recorded history, those planes crashed into those towers in an attack orchestrated by religious fundamentalists. This morning ushered in what my people call the Age of Global Terror. We've been studying the roots of that age by reproducing the sum of human history up until that moment. And now..." He shrugged minutely. "We're finished."

I think my thoughts were something like, *Oh, shit*, probably the same as your thoughts, though it's hard to remember what I really felt, then. Of course I wanted to disbelieve, but, you understand. Planes hanging in mid-air. Future-guy appearing in our living room. It was pretty persuasive.

"Your world is just a simulation, running on computers – what you would call computers – in the far future. That is, it's the present, for me, but from your point of view... I'm sorry if this is confusing. This is not my native semiotic level. The world you know, the lives you've led, they are...a dramatization of the past, as accurate as we could make it, peopled by all the same individuals who lived in the real history, doing all the same things their original counterparts did, guided not by rote programming but by perfectly reproduced pressures of nature and nurture, the combination of initial conditions and environment." Professor Badnews glanced around and pointed at one of the prints hanging on our off-white walls – that Waterhouse painting, 'Nymphs Finding the Head of Orpheus'. He said, "Ah, you see, this painting – it's a print, a reproduction of the original. You are the same, a reproduction of –"

"We understand what you mean." I was pissed off that he considered us so slow, primitive,

whatever he thought. "We're science fiction writers." Or *trying to be*. I'd met Heather at a brunch thrown by the organizers of an online magazine we'd both contributed to. "You mean we're living in a simulation. Like that movie *The Matrix*."

He nodded. "That is a comparison many in this nation make. Are making. Except...you have no real bodies tucked away in vats somewhere else. You are nothing *but* simulations. Like characters on a holodeck, some of your peers have said."

"We're not *real*?" Heather said.

"Not strictly speaking. But, arguably, you are sentient. That's why I'm here. Normally in a historical simulation of this kind, when the study is over, we simply, ah, you would say 'pull the plug'. But this is a very advanced program, inhabited by artificial but nevertheless rational actors – by which I mean all the simulated humans, along with some of the larger sea mammals – and our ethics committee has ruled we cannot simply 'pull the plug' on your existence. A majority of the committee believes that would constitute genocide."

"If you're not ending the experiment, why appear to us at all? Why not just let us go on living as we were?" I'm not normally a vocal proponent of the idea that ignorance is bliss, but I was beginning to come around to the argument.

"Yes. A valid question. The scale of this study is large, as you can imagine, and the resources necessary to accurately simulate an entire planet and all its six billion inhabitants are staggering. Since the study is over, we can't justify the amount of processing power required to continue at the current level of resolution, and so I've come to let everyone know about certain, ah, reductions in non-essential services."

'Non-essential services' is a phrase to chill the blood. I imagined dead pixels in the surface of the moon, frozen tides, the sun switched off like a lamp. "Such as?"

"Well." He shifted uncomfortably, and I resented the psychological manipulation – he was a projected image, he wasn't *uncomfortable*, and I suspect he was just trying to make me feel bad for him in his role as bearer of bad news. (Dawson figures I was right about that, by the way.) "Weather is the main thing. Simulating weather is *hugely* resource-intensive, we've only been able to accurately model such chaotic systems for a few decades, and they take up enormous quantities of processing power. So that has to stop."

"There won't be any more *weather*?" Heather was a gardener, and she had relatives who ran a working farm – I think she grasped the implications quicker than I did. "What does that even mean?"

"The weather...just won't change. Where it's raining now, it will continue to rain. Where it's not raining, it won't rain again. And so on. There was some talk of stopping the Earth's rotation, but that's comparatively simple to model, and it was felt by the committee that eternal night for half the planet would be unnecessarily psychologically debilitating. Likewise, the tides will continue."

I stared at him. "So our choices are to live in places of permanent flooding or permanent drought? We'll all starve to death!"

"Ah, no, you don't need to eat anymore. To require you to do so would be monstrous. There will likely be some movement of the population away from climactically inhospitable areas, but with no new children being born, overcrowding in temperate

areas should only be a temporary –"

"No more *children*?"

He frowned. "Of course not. The study is over. We need no more subjects."

I looked at my girlfriend, and saw the same bleakness in her eyes that I felt behind my own. We were in our twenties and had only been living together for a month, hadn't even talked about marriage, and we'd certainly never talked about children – but I think we both thought *someday* we'd talk about children.

"Let me see if I understand," I said slowly. "We'll just go on living, not needing to eat, with no more kids being born, until we all...die of old age?"

"Yes. Or accidents. Or...well...we suspect some may decide they prefer not to live, given their new understanding of reality."

"What about disease?" my girlfriend said.

He made a seesawing gesture with his hand. "Not global pandemics – also surprisingly hard to accurately simulate – but most diseases will remain, yes."

"Why don't you get rid of disease!" She looked pissed. Her father had died of emphysema before we met.

"Ah, well, the basic forms of your bodies and the frailties therein are already established, built into the simulation as it were, and changing them all..." He shrugged. "Not for a study that's over. If there are no further questions... Then that's all."

"What do you mean that's all?"

"I have nothing else to tell you. The study is over. You're free to live your lives however you see fit."

"What lives?"

"That's a question you'll have to settle for yourselves." He blinked his eyes. Then he blinked out of existence.

My girlfriend and I reached out and held each other on the couch, silently. Outside, in the streets of Oakland, dogs barked and sirens wailed.

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The next thing I remember seeing on the TV was the image of falling bodies as the passengers and crew of Flight 11 opened the cabin door and tossed the struggling hijackers to their deaths. Some of the reporters gasped. Others cheered.

The survivors of the flights said that when he arrived the Ambassador disarmed the hijackers with a wave of his hand, rounded them up, and asked them a series of questions. None of the survivors understood the language being spoken during that conversation. When I asked Dawson what he thought Future Man and the hijackers had talked about, he just shrugged and said, "Exit interview. Not uncommon in a psychological experiment." Then he went back to digging.

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I don't know about you, but I was most impatient with the disbelievers. A bunch of Flat-Earth, the moon-landing-was-faked, Holocaust-denier types, sure, but ordinary people too. (Then again, it's hard not to have sympathy for the wacky conspiracy theorists, especially since some small subset of them were proved right – the world *is* fake, and everything we know really *is* a lie.) Humans are driven by engines of denial, obstinance, and short-sightedness, whether we're simulated or not. Government officials telling us to disbelieve the evidence of our eyes. Experts talking about mass hysteria, even as other experts – experts at piloting helicopters – hovered over New York rescuing the pas-

sengers who were stuck on those frozen planes in New York, and the other plane stopped a handsbreadth from the Pentagon. Flight 93 was close enough to the ground in Pennsylvania when it froze that the local fire department just rescued the passengers with hook-and-ladder trucks and big inflatable pads to cushion the ones too scared or old or frail to climb. And still people argued, shouted on TV, blamed terrorists or Western imperialists, called it a hoax. The scientists tried to be rational, to tell us how deep space had gone suddenly static, no more pulsars pulsing, no more stars exploding – more non-essential services taken offline – but nobody listens to scientists in America. After a few weeks with no babies born, though, with people realizing they didn't get hungry anymore, with the weather never changing, it began to sink in. The first wave of suicides was pretty brutal. Maybe as much as ten percent of the population, dead by their own hands. Nihilism is tough to live with. Me, I was always an atheist. Finding out there was no point to our existence, besides whatever point we create, wasn't too tough for me. Though I did wonder if I'd been robbed of a destiny. I never believed in destiny before, but now I knew there was *literally* a different life I was meant to lead, that I would never have now.

Not as many religious nuts killed themselves as I expected. Those people are adaptable. They came up with whole new weird explanations, most involving the UN and the Antichrist. Just as boring and incomprehensible as the old weird explanations, really.

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It was the end of the world, sort of, so I decided to take a road trip. My relationship with Heather didn't even last until the end of September – she was worried about her mom, living all alone in the middle of the country, in the middle of increasing unrest and craziness, and she made arrangements to catch a ride back home with some old friends. There was no discussion of my going with her. In those last days it was like she couldn't see me at all, she just looked beyond me, moved around me without noticing my presence. To be fair, I was probably the same to her. Our world of possibilities had been beheaded. There was nothing else keeping me in Oakland. I'd lived there for about a month, having relocated from Santa Cruz when my old contract job ran out and Heather agreed to let me live with her, so I'd hardly put down roots. I'd only been working at my new job as an editorial assistant for a trade publishing magazine for a few weeks, and the few friends I had weren't close enough to stay for, or else they'd scattered.

So I loaded up my silver Nissan with my worldly possessions – that only just filled the back seat and the trunk, and it was mostly books – and set out East, reversing the course I'd taken thirteen months before, when I left the mountains of North Carolina to seek my fortune.

There were a lot of cars out on the road, a lot of people trying to get to one place from another for whatever reasons of their own. I passed a few crashes, maybe two or three a day, and there were places in the mountains or over rivers where people had clearly just lost their shit, decided there was no point anymore and crashed through guardrails, dropping their simulated cars into simulated rivers and gulches. The radio, especially in the dead stretches at night, was full of preachers, and I listened,

because it was that or country-and-western music, and I've got my limits.

I won't lie to you, it was a depressing goddamn journey. I looked into that empty sky and what I missed most were the clouds. The way they used to slide across the sky, like they had someplace to go, but weren't in any particular hurry to get there. That was me, I guess – moving cloudwise, knowing I'd get where I was going eventually. I didn't have a cell phone, which was okay, since they didn't work reliably anymore anyway – neither did pay phones, so I couldn't let Dawson know I was coming, though I tried a few times. I couldn't even be sure he was still there, living in the house we'd shared with a few friends in Boone – he had family farther east, maybe he'd gone to join them in these times of tribulation. But he was one of my dearest friends, the guy who always seemed to know how to deal with anything, from flat tires to financial catastrophe to muggers to bad trips, without even blinking. We'd met at a writing workshop freshmen year, when he decided he wasn't really a writer and I decided I really was, and we'd been tight ever since, and were roommates for years. He was a Chinese-Hawaiian military brat who'd trained in more martial arts than I could remember the names for, owned about five swords, smoked incessantly, liked to stay up all night talking about movies, and was no better at playing chess than I was, though he loved it just as much. Who better to spend the end of the world with? Of course, Dawson wasn't perfect. He was shit at romance and creative writing. We used to joke that I was a lover and he was a fighter. Fighting didn't sound bad to me, but what could we possibly fight for? Or with? Or against?

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It was a pretty mellow apocalypse, all in all. I mean, nothing was *broken*. Nothing exploded. Driving through Texas I was a little weirded out to see somebody had attacked the second largest cross in the Western hemisphere, something of a landmark in the area, and one of its arms was hanging broken. Sometimes cars went past me the other way *fast*, and military vehicles, and cops, but I figured they were dealing with little local disasters. I wondered how long people would last in that part of Texas. It was always pretty dry, but there was a difference between 'always pretty dry' and 'absolutely never getting any rain at all, ever again, *never*.' Even cacti die of thirst eventually, right?

But I didn't. I'd gotten used to not eating – I was never hungry, so it just didn't occur to me – but I was filling up the overheated radiator at a filling station in the desert when I realized I hadn't had a drop of anything to drink in a couple of days, not even a caffeinated soda. Didn't much miss drinking, either. I did miss pissing and taking craps, though. I'd done some good thinking while pissing and taking craps. I still *could* eat but it seemed like a lot of hassle, and it's not like many of the highway fast food joints were open. When the world's falling apart, you don't keep your gig as a drive-through attendant.

I'd been sleeping in my car on the side of the road, but I wasn't exactly *tired*, either. Was sleep just a habit, too? That night I drove straight through, and wasn't tired a bit, and didn't notice any blariness or weariness or psychotic breaks. Maybe there were perks to this apocalypse after all. No sleep meant more time to do... Oh, right. There was no point in doing anything. So much for silver linings.

I got to Boone in late afternoon and pulled into the old familiar driveway, the same one I'd pulled away from a bit over a year before. Back then, right after college, I'd shared the little brick house and split the rent with four other guys, and after graduation we'd all gone our separate ways...except for Dawson, who'd kept the whole place for himself. He'd studied clinical psych in college, even co-authored a couple of papers (one controversial one about whether violent videogames primed people for real-life violent behavior), but pretty soon after graduating he got into traditional Chinese medicine and started training in acupuncture.

Dawson was sitting on the porch, wearing overalls and all spattered with mud, drinking a beer. He raised his hand to me in a little wave when I pulled into the driveway, like I'd just run out to the store or something. I turned off the car and went up the steps, and he stood up and hugged me. He didn't mind my days-on-the-road stink and I didn't mind his mud smears. I used to say Dawson was one of the few people in the world who, if he called me and said he needed help, I'd hop the next plane, no questions asked. Nowadays the planes aren't flying anymore, but the principle's the same.

"Welcome back, bro," he said. "We shouldn't talk here. Come with me to the basement." He went down the steps and around the house, and I followed for about a dozen paces before I remembered that this house didn't have a basement.

"So I've been digging this hole in the ground," Dawson said, nodding to a messy tarp spread out in the backyard. "But the moles started it. You know we always had trouble with them digging tunnels in the yard. I was walking back here, and one of the holes...looked funny. It wasn't dark inside. It was bright. So I got a shovel, and started expanding it, and, well..." He bent down, grabbed the edge of the tarp, and whipped it aside.

A slanted tunnel drove down into the earth, shored up here and there with two-by-fours, and at the bottom there was...a big white glowing nothing.

"What the fuck is that?"

Dawson shrugged. "Do I look like a godlike programmer from beyond the simulation? I'm not sure. But you know how sometimes, when you're playing a video game, you hit a buggy section and suddenly you're moving *under* the terrain? Where you can see the polygons and the colors are reversed or there are no colors at all, because it's not something players are ever meant to see, it's unfinished virtual space? I think this is like that. Come on down."

He slipped into the hole – hence the muddiness – and soon vanished from sight, and after a second I followed him, as I'd followed him into innumerable parties, smoky bars, and dark woods in the years of our friendship. It was a weird descent, half climb, half slide, and eventually we wound up in a cavern about seven feet high and ten feet across, partly dirt, partly that white glowing null-space. There was a shovel and a pickaxe and a few buckets – Dawson was expanding the cavern, chipping away the dirt and roots to expand the whiteness. A couple of tarps hung on the walls, held on with tent spikes driven into the corners. There were also a pair of filthy folding chairs, and Dawson and I sat down.

I looked around. The nullness didn't get any less weird under

examination – it was white light that was *also* physical space. "Guess you found a project to keep yourself occupied in the post-apocalypse."

"I could be wrong, but I think it's possible we can talk here without being monitored," Dawson said, leaning forward earnestly. "I think this little room is technically outside the simulation – or under it, anyway. They might not be able to hear us."

"They? Bro, they're not listening. They're gone. They left us here."

Dawson sighed. "I got you into a couple of psychological studies back when we were undergrads, remember?"

"Sure." Mostly filling out questionnaires and answering hypothetical questions and the like. No Stanford Prison Experiment-level weirdness or anything.

"What's the first thing to remember when you become part of an experiment?"

"I was an English major, Dawson, you'll have to refresh my memory."

"The researchers *lie* to you. They tell you the experiment is about one thing – but it's really about another. Because if the research subjects know the *true* purpose of the experiment, they might not act naturally, and the experiment would be contaminated. So they tell you they want to ask you some questions about your buying habits, then lock you in a room alone for hours with nothing but a pitcher of water, because they *really* want to see how long it takes before you overcome your societal training and piss in the corner. Or they tell you they're studying the pain threshold of test subjects receiving electric shocks, when they're *really* testing to see how much pain you're willing to inflict on a stranger just because some guy in a lab coat told you to."

I frowned. "But...the study's over..."

Dawson shook his head. "I doubt it. The explanation they gave totally falls apart when you start to examine it. They can make it so we don't have babies, don't get hungry, don't get thirsty, and don't sleep, but they can't get rid of disease? They have so much power they're able to convincingly simulate an entire planet, but they can't afford to leave the simulation running quietly in the background, or to download our minds into bodies in the *real* world, outside the simulation? Somebody somewhere on an ethics committee is unwilling to just let us vanish into oblivion, but isn't troubled by the cruel-and-unusual implications of letting us go slowly insane in our fishbowl world? I call bullshit. There's something else going on here."

I felt like I'd had my world turned inside out...again. "Like what? What do you think their real purpose is?"

"Who knows? A rat in a maze can't hope to understand the fundamental underpinnings of behavioral science. Maybe it's beyond us entirely."

"So what do we do?"

Dawson grinned. "Well, we can be good rats, and keep running the maze they've built for us."

"Or?"

"Or..." He stood and pulled down a tarp on the wall with a flourish, revealing another tunnel – but this one didn't lead to whiteness. It led to trees, lots of trees, a forest of trees...sideways trees, the ground to the left, the sky to the right. My head hurt just looking at it.

"Ta da," Dawson said. "The world isn't a globe, Tim, not really. This is all map, no territory. Geography is an illusion here. I was just digging out of curiosity at first, to see how deep the whiteness went, but I found... I don't know. A warp. A shortcut to another map. Go through that tunnel, and you pop out sideways in Germany, near the Black Forest. I found another tunnel that leads to Perth, in Australia. International travel is a thing of the past for most people, and the whole communications infrastructure of the world has crumbled. Gas is running out since the oil wells are all empty now. We're going back to basics here. I gotta think, whatever the researchers are really interested in, they want us all isolated, localized, tribal, *fragmented*. Maybe they want to study the collapse of a civilization? Who knows. But we don't have to collapse. We don't have to be fragments. We can keep digging, maybe find more tunnels, and you and me..."

"We could walk the earth," I said.

"We could spread the word. Spread the good news. Or the bad news, I guess."

"But even if the researchers can't hear us in this place, they'll notice eventually. What if they fix the bug? Close the shortcuts?"

"Ah," he said, smiling that big broad smile I loved. "Then I'll *know* I'm right. Then I'll have *proof* we aren't just an abandoned simulation, that they're still monitoring us. It's win-win."

I laughed. "And what if they just erase us? Or if the next hole you dig opens up in the bottom of the ocean and we drown?"

"A life without risks is no life at all, Tim."

.....

We go a lot of places, but we can't go everywhere, so we made this little 'zine, this chain letter, and started sending it around. If you've read this, you already know the important thing: the researchers are lying to us. They've got a hidden agenda. Just having that knowledge in your head helps ruin their study – whatever it is. We hope you'll make a copy of this, handwritten or otherwise if you've still got access to working tech, and that you'll pass it on. Or start digging your own hole, and see if you hit a shortcut, and tell whoever you find on the other side. The shortcuts are all over. Maybe they're part of the experiment, Dawson says it's possible, anything is, the researchers are smarter than us, but he told me something else I take comfort in. He said if we were really a historical simulation before, we were constrained by whatever we'd actually done in our original lives, controlled by historical imperatives. But now history is broken, the future is wide open, and we're free. For the first time, we're free. We'd better start acting like it.

Because this shit can't go on. We're not rats, we're not worms, we're not fruit flies – we're sentient. Maybe the researchers *made* us that way, but every abused kid should know you don't owe unconditional loyalty to the ones that made you, and our makers haven't earned our respect. So let's fuck up their game. Let's smash their study. Let's break the experiment. Let's climb on our rooftops and shout, "We *know*, you bastards, we *know* you're lying to us." We'll have the world's largest sit in, or the world's biggest riot, and maybe the experimenters will pull the plug on us, or maybe they'll erase our memories and put us back in the old maze to live out our old lives, but the minute they do *something* – that's when we know we've won.

And even if they just ignore us, hell – what else do you have to

do with the time you've got left on this imaginary Earth?

.....

On my road trip, I spent a lot of time wondering what happened to the real me. The unsimulated Tim. Did I stay with Heather? Did we get married, have children, were we happy? I've always been fascinated by roads left untaken, possibilities unfulfilled, and now I was living in the ultimate wrong path. I used to write stories about regret and parallel universes and many-worlds theory and the god of the crossroads, and now I'm living in one.

Mostly – and I know it's shallow, but if I can't be honest with the anonymous masses of the world, who can I be honest with? – I wondered whether or not the real me ever became a famous writer. If maybe people even in Professor Fuckwit's time read the books I hadn't quite gotten around to writing yet in late 2001. I always wanted to be a famous writer, or, more specifically, I wanted to be a writer so good that fame was just an inevitable side effect – a writer that everyone would read, that everyone would feel compelled to read, a writer who was important, a writer who was *great*. I mentioned that old ambition to Dawson, just now, and he said, "That's a classic example of 'Be careful what you wish for,' bro."

I guess he's got a point. Because you're reading this, aren't you?

.....

Tim Pratt's stories have appeared in *The Best American Short Stories* and *The Year's Best Fantasy and Horror*, and have won a Hugo Award (and lost a Nebula). This is his first appearance in *Interzone*. He lives in Oakland CA with his wife and son.

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LADY OF THE WHITE-



SARAH L. EDWARDS

ILLUSTRATED BY MARTIN BLAND

SPIRED CITY



She came, Evriel Pashtan, emissary of his justice the high regent. Weary, silver-haired, faint-hoped she came to Kander, near-forgotten colony circling its cold little rose-hued sun. She greeted the honcho of Colonth, its foremost city; she nodded politely and distributed vids and holos; she attended a festival in her honor. And then she left the ship to the city's technicians for refitting and she flew off in her personal carrier to the far side of the planet, to a highland village enfolded in the deep of winter.

No one came out into the falling dusk to greet her. She pulled her layers of corn-silk closer around her and trudged the few meters through knee-deep drifts of snow to the single village street.

It had not changed so much. The houses were all different, rebuilt ten times or more since she had known them, and yet their number was nearly the same. There in the middle rose the sharp-peaked roof that marked the travelers' rest, its edging still painted scarlet like those in the regent's city – did anyone remember, or was it only tradition now? She paused in front of its door, glancing to the empty street behind her, and then she knocked.

It was a girl of maybe ten or twelve who opened the door, and her dark eyes widened in wonder when she saw Evriel.

"I've come a long way," Evriel said. "I wonder if I might stop here a while?"

The girl reached tentative fingers towards Evriel's over-robe. "Are you from down the mountain?"

Evriel smiled. "I'm from a good deal farther away than that."

The girl stepped aside. "Mother will want to see you." If she was surprised when Evriel walked unerringly to the welcome room with its coal-brimming brazier and its piled cushions, she didn't show it. She left Evriel there among the cushions and soon returned with a tea mug in her hand. Behind her came a woman, ebon-haired, with eyes older than her thirty-odd years.

Evriel rose and offered her hands in the old way. After a pause, the woman clasped them both in hers and kissed them, and Evriel kissed the woman's in turn.

"Sit, stranger, and be welcome," the woman said, the formal words old and familiar, long though it was since Evriel had heard them last. The woman motioned her to the cushions again while the girl handed Evriel the hot tea mug. "I am Sayla, and this house is open to any who seek shelter. This is my daughter, Asha." The girl nodded, setting her curls bobbing.

"I am Evriel Pashtan, emissary of our lord the high regent."

"Emissary?" the woman said, blankly.

"You *are*?" blurted the girl. "From Alabaster?"

"From Alabaster," Evriel agreed.

"From the home star – it's not possible," said Sayla. "The ships don't come anymore, not even to Colonth."

"Not for years and years," Asha added. "They talk about how a ship fell like a burning egg onto the Colonth plain, and how the people wore strange clothes – like yours." She reached for Evriel's robe again, then drew back. "But they're all gone now."

"Why have you come to the village?" said Sayla. "I don't understand. Did you wish to speak with my husband? You cannot. The fever took him this summer past."

"No, I'm not looking for your husband," said Evriel. Then she realized what the woman had said. More softly, "I'm so sorry for your loss."

The woman shrugged. "It was bad timing, was all."

And what bitterness lay *there*, Evriel wondered. She turned the thought aside. "I should say, I *have* been emissary of the high regent. I'm on leave now, to travel as I wish for a little while."

A faint smile, not quite ironed of the pain that had creased it before. "And you come here? Whatever for?"

Evriel could not put it so baldly as she wanted – not because of politics, for once, but because the truth sounded feeble, even

narcissistic. It *was* narcissistic, looking for one's old footprints on the world. She shouldn't have come.

"Certainly you needn't tell us such things," Sayla was saying, with careful incuriosity. "It is not a season when we see many visitors" – *not that we ever see many*, the tone implied – "but you are welcome to what we have. Asha, bread and cream for the emissary."

Asha dashed off, eyes still wide. She returned in moments with a cloth of rye bread and a bowl of goats' milk cream, which she handed to Evriel, and then she stood at the door as both daughter and servant of the house.

"I've visited your village before," Evriel told Sayla, "long ago. It was...a very peaceful time in my life." She paused, wondering how to put into words what she'd come so far to ask. "I knew a family before. I can't remember them very well now, it was so long ago. They lived here, I think. Their name was Reizi."

Sayla's eyebrows rose. "There are Reizis in a village down the mountain. They are my cousins, very distantly. But none have lived here since before I was born – perhaps you confused the villages. One is very much like another."

Cousins to the Reizis.

Only years of diplomacy kept Evriel's fingers from reaching to touch this woman, so distant a connection and yet nearer than any she'd had since... Since.

Maybe Sayla saw some of that hunger in her eyes. She said something about chores for the night and took herself away. Asha settled into the cushions nearby and paused, apparently trying to decide where to start. Evriel turned her attention to the bread cloth and waited.

"You're really from Alabaster," Asha said finally.

"I really am," said Evriel, dipping a chunk of bread into the cream.

"So you've been traveling years and years to come here, haven't you?"

"It has seemed only a bit more than a month to me. But yes, it's been many years since my ship left Regent City."

"So if you went back...everyone you knew would be dead?" There was no malice in her voice, only curiosity.

"Yes," Evriel said quietly. "Everyone is already dead except for a handful of emissaries, like myself, off in their starships."

"Then everyone you visited *here*, when you were here before, is dead as well?"

Evriel nodded.

"You knew the Reizi family when they lived in this village."

"Yes."

"And you knew their names?"

"Ander and Ivolda Reizi. And" – Evriel's voice caught – "and a little girl named Lakmi." *Lakmi, child of my body, daughter of my heart.*

Sayla returned and announced it was time for sleep, and led Evriel to the room at the center of the house. A blanket large enough to span the entire room was half-draped over the covered grate in the center, already brimming with coals. Evriel laid aside her heaviest robes and burrowed under the blanket, into the sleeping cushions beneath. Nearby Asha did the same as Sayla closed the door and blew out the candle.

Evriel closed her eyes against the sudden darkness and steadied her breathing, shallowing it, drawing to herself the sleep

that threatened not to come. Asha lay only an arm's length away. Would Lakmi have looked like her, at her age?

The next morning Evriel woke to a sharp draft blowing past Sayla, standing in the doorway. "They've come to talk to you," Sayla said. "The other folk of the village. They want to talk to the regent's emissary."

Of course, her carrier. It was bound to draw curiosity, and hadn't she wanted to talk to them, anyway? Though perhaps not all at once. She pulled on her robes and tidied her white hair back into its braid, and then followed Sayla to the front door.

For a moment she could only see the deceptive, almost depthless view of brilliant snow and blue shadow. Then the shadows resolved into the long rolling hills down to the Serra River, miles away. It was a view she hadn't seen in forty-five years – or several hundred. Either way, it hadn't changed.

Then somebody coughed, and she realized the lane in front of the house was crowded with villagers – half the population, at least.

Evriel smiled on them all and turned to Sayla. "Bring them to the meeting room one at a time, or in small groups, as they wish."

Soon enough a small balding man stood in front of her, bowing and nodding, his young wife and three small children behind him. "We come to bless the regent and his emissary, and wish fair success," he said, stumbling over the formal words but managing to get them all out. His wife nodded while the children stared at Evriel, wide-eyed.

Comforting to hear the old phrases spoken here, when even the honcho of Colonth hadn't known them. Evriel gave them a genuine smile, no hint of diplomatic edge about it. "The regent and his emissary thank you, and bless you likewise." More bowing, and then they were gone and replaced by another family, with similar greetings.

It wasn't until the third group of well-wishers that Evriel remembered to ask questions: did they know the Reizis, or their kin? What of other emissaries passing between the regent and his colony? "Old Mergo Reizi lives down by the Serra," she heard, "but he's the last of his kin I know of." Or, "There was an emissary off in the spacewalker city, I hear. But that was a long time ago." Or, "I just mind my sheep, Lady Emissary."

When the last of them was gone, Sayla brought tea and a plate of bread heaped with cured meat – goat, Evriel guessed. She took mug and tea from Sayla and said, "Will you sit with me?"

Sayla crossed her legs and sat down, silent.

"Sayla, how would *you* suggest I look for traces of a little girl? You know better than I who would know, who remembers things."

"There's the archivist," Sayla said. "Likely you'll want to see him."

"You've an archivist here? Yes, I should like very much to speak with him." *Not yet*, something whispered. If there was nothing, she didn't want to know. Not yet. "And what of your cousin down the mountain, this Mergo Reizi?"

The smallest of grimaces crossed Sayla's face, and was gone. "I doubt you'll get anything from him."

"Oh?"

"He...hasn't much of a memory anymore. Won't have any-

thing to tell you."

"I see." Evriel frowned at a strip of goat and bit in. Excellent; probably supplied to the travelers' rest by a local goatherd. "Still, I rather think I'd like to meet him."

Sayla shrugged. "I'll tell you how to get there – you taking your flyer?" When Evriel nodded, she said, "Take Asha with you, she can tell you the landmarks."

"That sounds like just the thing."

"I'll tell you," Sayla repeated. "Just don't go giving any greetings from me."

A beaten track of small footprints circled the carrier. "Kids," Asha said scornfully, but she approached the carrier cautiously, reaching out to stroke one gleaming wing. Evriel settled her in the cockpit and she peered all around at the dials and switches, her hands carefully folded in her lap. Once in the air she kept her eyes on the white expanse below and said very little, except to point out landmarks: a solitary copse of pines; the long blue shadow that marked a boundary wall.

Mergo Reizi was a rheumy-eyed, suspicious man who declared he had little use for "up-hillers." He lived in a hut of mud reinforced with straw. Evriel felt a flash of sorrow to think of Lakmi living in such a place, until she reminded herself that the structure couldn't be more than five years old. The man had never heard of any ancestress or cousin named Lakmi, though if he had Evriel wasn't sure he would have told them. But he was, she thought, telling the truth. He claimed no living relatives.

It was hardly surprising; the girl would have taken another name when she married. A complete sweep of genealogical records for the area might conceivably turn up a Lakmi Reizi, married to a Master So-and-So and proud matriarch of the Clan Such-and-Such.

But this was to have been a short stay; she and the small, ship-merged crew would begin the long voyage home as soon as the ship was refitted. She had already fulfilled the mission's purpose: to appear in Colonth, deliver the regent's many gifts and promises, and remind the colonists of their allegiance to the Regency – for all it mattered to them.

It was Asha who finally broke the silence. "Mother would tell me it was rude to ask questions."

"I wouldn't," Evriel said. "Unless you mean to ask rude questions." She gave Asha an encouraging smile.

Asha shook her head. "No – at least, I don't think they are. But there are things I have to know. If you would tell me," Asha added, bobbing her head nervously.

"Yes?"

"Is it – that is – we are a very small village, aren't we?"

Evriel thought of Colonth's swinging gates, wider than two village houses together. And then of Regent City, vast anthill of tunnels and streets and spires. "Yes."

"That must be why you went away?"

"Went away? I visited once before..."

"But you lived here, didn't you? The 'shining star of the regent king, shot to Kander to speak his words' – that's you, isn't it?"

"Is it a song? I don't..."

"Married a son of Kander's earth, a shepherd rough but warm of eye' – don't you know it? But I suppose they didn't write it until you'd gone back to the regent."

Evriel shook her head, but she was beginning to get the idea. "You've a song about a regent's emissary?"

Asha nodded, and red curls bobbed free of her hat. "I'll sing you all of it, if you like. It's of an emissary that came to our very village, perched on the tumbling plains, and fell in love with one of the folk and decided to stay, never to fly the long journey across the stars to the city of the regent." Cadence crept into her voice. "But her love died of the summer fever, and in grief she flew away again, weeping her loss and raging against the planet that killed him. And as she flew she promised that when she came again, it would be with scourging fire."

Evriel had turned and was staring down, down those "tumbling plains." Had she promised fire? Yes, she'd been angry, though the memory of it was vague. It was a young, violent anger, now long burnt out. The lack of him remained, but it did not even ache anymore.

Yet Lakmi, whom she'd known so briefly, seemed more absent now than she had in forty years.

Evriel piled cushions next to the glass-block window, laid a blanket over them all, and sat watching the snow wisping and swirling. It had been like this the winter before Lakmi, when she sat at another window in another house, now torn down. Japhesh had just put a grate in the room before the first chill came, and Evriel had sat with a fire's warm glow at her back, watching the snow. It was security, a wall of blankness between her and the outer world. All she'd needed was Japhesh and his warm stone house and his child she was waiting for, the first of many hoped for, and she could leave that world behind her with no regrets.

She never wondered, then, if the other things were enough without Japhesh. That question came later.

"What did you hope to find, coming here?"

Evriel stirred from her thoughts, summoned a smile as Sayla sat down nearby. "Just ghosts, I suppose. Memories."

"I'd forgotten that old song – my daughter told me."

Evriel shrugged. "It might not have anything to do with me. It seems improper, somehow, to have one's past sung in a ballad by utter strangers. Unseemly."

"But it's true, isn't it? You coming here, marrying a village boy?" There was nothing in Sayla's face or her voice.

"Yes. It was my first assignment – a trial, more or less. There were ten of us. We were gathering data. None of us had the experience to analyze very much of what we collected. All they really wanted us to do was get used to talking to people, observing. Being the long arm of the regent. And they wanted to shake loose the more starry-eyed among us – better to lose us here, on a colony of the Commonwealth, than to some rival's planet."

Evriel took Sayla's steady gaze for encouragement. "I was here in the highlands taking histories, life stories, teaching children's circles about the regent's planet and the White-Spired City. Japhesh was my guide. He took me all over the backlands, to the most remote villages. I wonder if they're still there. We...grew fond of one another." Hadn't she just been thinking how the old grief had faded? Then why were her eyes burning?

"And the summer fevers took him, didn't they?"

"Yes." Slowly, agonizingly. She'd had to give Lakmi to Japhesh's parents while she'd stayed at his side, watching the life seep from him in beads of sweat.

"I knew it was that," Sayla was saying. "It doesn't say in the song, but I knew it must have been."

Something in her voice reminded Evriel of nearly the first thing Sayla had said, that first day. She saw how Sayla's eyes gleamed wet in the firelight. She hesitated, and finally she shifted from her pile of cushions and squeezed Sayla's hand.

After a moment, Sayla pulled the hand away. "At least you had somewhere to go, when he was dead."

"You mean, the house – ?"

"The world. You didn't have to stay in this village with these folk pitying you for living with him and then pitying you when he died, and you having no place in the world – in all the worlds – but the travelers' rest, just next door to the house he nearly kicked you out of, time and time again." Her voice was empty, colorless. "It's no wonder my girl wants to go see other worlds – this one's done nothing for her."

Evriel nodded and looked away, into the fire.

"You got back in that shiny egg and flew away again, nothing holding you back."

"My daughter," Evriel said. She felt the surprise flashing in Sayla's eyes. "The song doesn't mention that either, does it? Lakmi was too young for a star voyage and there wouldn't be another ship in my lifetime, probably. You hate your memories, your village so much that you'd take your daughter and never look back? I abandoned my daughter here rather than stay."

Evriel searched Sayla's face, her eyes, for the revulsion she knew would be there. Finally, someone would see the coward behind the polished veneer, and turn away.

But Sayla didn't turn away. She said, "The archivist knows. Asha will take you to him tomorrow – he's in a settlement up on Starshore Ridge. He'll tell you about your daughter." Then she rose and left the room, her face still blank and empty.

Asha wouldn't let Evriel take the personal carrier to the archivist's settlement. "It would make too much noise," she said. Then, "It would disturb the animals." Finally, unyieldingly, "It wouldn't be right to visit the archivist in a machine." So Evriel strapped on skis and tentatively slid up and down the street. She'd known skiing once, briefly. She followed Asha in long, shallow sweeps up the hillsides, stopping every so often to catch her breath again and thank the most high regent for the nanos that let her do this when the natural body would already have broken down.

They skimmed up onto Starshore Ridge just before midday. Standing at its edge was like standing on a map of the world: off to the left were the hills they'd just come up, yes, and farther off the dark peaks of the village roofs. Far below ran the black-thread Serra. But beyond that stood Ranglo, City of Ebon Stone – a proper city, with a carrier-port and a laserline to Sable, and Sorrel, and all the way around the planet to Colonth. Away off to the right were shadowy peaks, and but for the clouds tethered to their sides, Evriel knew, she could have seen over them to the gray expanse that was the Simolian Sea.

Oh, how large Kander was. Why in her memory was it always so small, even when she stood in the middle of it?

But Asha was talking and pointing towards a much nearer goal: a handful of low-built structures with smoke curling from their roofs, only ten minutes away. Evriel turned reluctantly and followed her.

There were children running down the hill to welcome them. Asha laughed and pushed away their prying fingers. "Inside!" she said. "Take us to the archivist. We've news and documents and a query, and we're hungry!"

Inside the largest sod-roofed house there was a mutton stew and mugs of tea. More than children clustered around them in the meeting room as Asha clutched a mug with one hand and with the other doled out letters from her pack.

"Not many come up this far, this time of year," said the woman who'd brought the tea. "We're glad enough to see any face we haven't been staring at for months, but we're partial to Asha. She's always up here summertimes, bothering the archivist."

"Yes, the archivist," Evriel said. "We've come to speak with him."

"He'll be around soon enough," the woman said, "soon as this crowd gets their fill."

For a moment, spooning hot chunks of mutton and watching Asha drop letters into waiting hands, Evriel could ignore the reason she'd come and just observe, as for so many years she had observed for the far-distant, long-dead regent. This was the village meeting-house, today scattered with the bones of children's games. Two old men, bent and bearded like ancient trees, huddled at a corner table. Was one of them the archivist? Evriel turned the thought away. Not yet.

From an open doorway in the far wall blew heat and savory smells, likely for the dinner meal since it was past the usual lunchtime. The settlement had fewer huts than Asha's village, but Evriel had noticed scarlet daubed on the edges of the highest roof – the archivist's work, perhaps.

"Greetings, Lady Emissary."

Evriel started; she had not even noticed the man sliding onto the opposite bench. He was not so old as she'd expected; his hair was only patchily flecked with gray and though his skin was sun-weathered his eyes were clear and intent. "Greetings, sir," she said. "Do I address the archivist?"

"You do," he said. The kitchen maid appeared at his elbow with a bowl of stew, and he smiled thanks to her. To Evriel he said, "How does an emissary of the regent come to our small village?"

"On skis," she said, gesturing towards her pair leaning against the door. "Shakily."

He smiled again, and she recognized it and smiled back. His was a professional smile, like hers, much-practiced but no less genuine for that, most of the time. Yes, here was an observer who spent his life as she had: listening.

"I'm told you may be able to help me with a personal concern of mine," she said.

"In return for as much as news of the outer world as I can beg from you?"

"Oh? Sayla wasn't specific, but I'd thought you were a sort of local historian. Do you archive the outer world?"

"I should hope not; I'd do a pretty poor job of it from my room halfway up the Starshores. No, you're right." He spread his hands, encompassing the room and all the meeting-house. "These are my people, my concerns. I ask after the world beyond out of irrepressible curiosity. Now, what can I tell you?"

She hesitated. Now she would know. The long years of wondering, the insistent discussions convincing the last regent that

she should be the one sent to Kander, the month in the ship, the week since she'd landed: an eternity of moments all pressed towards *this* moment.

"I visited the backlands once before, several hundred years ago," she said. "I knew a girl – just an infant. Her name was Lakmi, I believe Lakmi Reizi although –" She faltered. "Although I'm not sure about the family name. I would like to learn what became of her, if I could. If you know."

He was looking at her as the others had looked at their letters, eyes shining with discovery. "You're the lady of the scourging fire."

"The lady of – oh. Perhaps. Asha mentioned a ballad, but I don't know that it has anything to do with me."

"Let us find out." Evriel followed him out of the meeting room and down a dim corridor opening to rooms on both sides. At the end was a door, the only one Evriel had seen since she'd entered the building. The archivist clasped the handle firmly before turning it – a handprint lock, Evriel noted. And then he was leading her into a room any City emissary would have felt at home in. Blocks of solid-state memory were stacked in one corner, an interface screen sitting on the nearest. Along one wall hung all a proper emissary's equipment: vidcam, holocam for stills, an audiotape device, general-use comp unit. And in bookshelves at the other wall were the utterly obsolete artifacts that every observer she'd ever known had a weakness for, the books and scrolls and loose sheets of pressed wood pulp.

Here were the chambers of a historian. Here was home.

He caught her looking at the bookshelves and laughed. "I don't actually need that stuff. Everything's scanned into the archive. Here, I'll find the record for that ballad." He sat at the comp unit and typed for a minute. "Would you like to hear it sung? The Hill Country Corporate Choir recorded it a few years ago as part of their folk ballad series."

"I'd really rather..."

"Right, the girl. Sorry about that. Spell the name for me?"

She did, and then he padded at the keys for ten minutes, twenty, the screen flicking in and out of database listings and through strings of raw data. She noticed when her trembling stopped, though she hadn't when it started. He was data lord now. He would measure from his vast storehouses the allowance of grain she craved.

"The records are pretty patchy," he said. "We didn't have a proper archivist then. The genealogies were oral, if you can believe it."

"I remember." Months after she had arrived, Japhesh, no longer a mere guide but not yet a lover, had taken her donkeyback up to a valley with five mud-brick huts, four in a square and one in the center. In that central hut lived a woman, not quite blind, who looked as old as the stones that reinforced her walls. She'd spoken for hours, tracing the four village families via many roots and offshoots and grafts to grandchildren of Kander's original colonists. Evriel had recorded it all. When Japhesh reported weeks later that the gene-speaker had died, Evriel wondered what it had cost her to give the full history of her village one last time. "What does it say?"

"Married Kailo Reizi at age – well, I don't know, there's no birth record. Fifteen or sixteen, probably – that was the usual age then." His gaze slid sideways up to Evriel's face, fixing on a

cheekbone. "He was bereaved of her three years later. No children. No other record so far – I'll keep trawling."

"I see," she said. She didn't see. "So little?" She found herself sitting at the edge of a chair mostly piled with oilskin packets. So little. And Lakmi had died as she would – childless. No footprints.

"There's just not much from that time period – except your own records, of course."

She'd forgotten he would have those. He'd been quietly ignoring all he knew she wasn't telling him.

"They're my baseline for the entire period," he was saying. "Really wonderful work – that's why I keep them, I guess. Sentimental value."

She shook herself. "Keep them?"

"You saw them." He flicked a thumb behind him to the bookshelves of yellowed parchment.

"You're mistaken; I don't keep paper records. They're not portable."

"No, they're yours. They have all the proper emissary markings. You had other things on your mind at the time, I imagine." His voice was gentle – sparing her feelings, blight him.

"They're not mine, I tell you." Why was she snapping at him? "I don't keep paper records. You should have backups for two years of chips, recordings, and memory blocks. That is all I recorded and all I took." *Everything else I left here.*

"Two years...?" He pulled a bound volume from the shelf and flipped to the first yellowed page. "Here's an entry, spring of 465, colony reckoning." Another volume, another page. "Early autumn, 468. Poor harvest – the fevers were bad that year." He lifted a page of loose-leaf from a bundle in the shelf. "Winter 461. Snows moderate. Lady Emissary, if these aren't yours, whose are they?"

She took the page, thin and crackly as an insect's wing, and traced the first line with her finger. Yes, there were the emissary markings, the number, all written in blocky script nothing like her tight, rarely practiced hand. "I left in 450," she said. "You have my earlier records, yes? Surely you noticed the gap?"

"It was understood you had lived here for some time. If you put some of that time into your own household, no one would blame you."

"They're not mine," she said. The immediate, the obvious conjecture was *not* obvious, she told herself. She could not justify such a leap. "Please – you said these were scanned into the archive? I'd like a chip."

The long smooth coast down to Asha's village was quicker than the journey up, but it wasn't quick enough for Evriel. Even as she'd waited, fruitlessly, for the archivist to tell her of Lakmi, the comfortable abstraction of research and data and analysis had plucked at her attention. Now she had not only data but, even better, a riddle to solve. Now she would sift and pore and ponder, and she would keep damping the stubborn wick of hope that wouldn't be snuffed.

Arrived at Sayla's house, unwrapped and nestled in cushions, Evriel sipped at her broth and clicked through pages of records. The observer traveled little, it seemed, but the record of life in the village so many years before was full and meticulous. Births and deaths were listed, weddings, visitors from other villages.

The record remarked on blight and on the wax and wane of the summer fevers. Yet the lists of dialect words were clearly incomplete, for every page or so the observer let slip an unfamiliar word or a phrase likely never spoken off the backlands. Certainly, Evriel had no record of them anywhere else – she checked the collation of data from the other emissaries she'd traveled with, just to be sure.

Sayla came to tell Evriel the sleep room was prepared, and Evriel hum-hummed assent and read on. A while later Asha came and bid her good night.

From these traces Evriel began to form a picture of this faceless gatherer of fact, tradition, and tale. She – or he? But the women were more likely to be literate than the men; surely it was a woman's work she read. Surely, she, this nameless woman, was a native of the backlands. She followed the basic form of an emissary's official reports to the regent, yet she clearly lacked the training. Why had she kept such records?

And why, oh why did she not somewhere identify herself? Even emissaries, who prized objectivity of all things, marked each record with a name. Why, in this one thing, had the observer not followed form?

The scanned words began to blur, and finally Evriel put the portable reader aside. Finally, she drew from her day sack the other thing the archivist had given her: sheets of yellowed paper wrapped in oilcloth.

"You should have originals to study," the archivist had said. "These are the oldest."

Now she unwrapped the fragile sheets. In an emissary's travels, data was precious but paper was only mass, a costly artifact. Evriel was no collector of artifacts. Yet she gave a moment's notice to the warm brown of age, the faded ink, the thick awkward scrawl of the letters. They were not the letters of a person who practiced them overmuch.

What did she expect to find? She had already read these records, scanned into the electronic record by some past archivist and rendered in the standard script. She read them again, anyway, searching for some hint of identity, some proof of the woman – girl? – who'd written them. Some assurance that her daughter's life, so long ended, was not wholly lost.

The stark light of dawn woke her. She stirred, realized that her arms were bare, and pulled her robes closer around her. They were not enough.

"Tea?" Sayla held out a mug.

"Yes, thank you." Evriel clasped stiff fingers around the stone-ware's heat.

Sayla settled into cushions nearer the window with another mug. "Find what you were looking for?"

Evriel saw the old pages, heaped where they'd fallen from her fingers. "I...don't think so. I hoped maybe it was my daughter that took up my work after I left – kept the record I would have kept. Even inspired that archivist up the hill to his archiving. Vanity." She coughed a brittle laugh. "But there's no evidence."

"She made your song."

"What?"

Sayla was watching her carefully, deeply. "The song Asha told you, about you and your man. Your daughter made it."

"How – ?" Shakily Evriel set her tea aside. "How do you know?"

The archivist – ”

“I gave him too much credit,” Sayla said. “He knows lots, you can be sure, but he doesn’t always remember all of it. He’s like his machines – if you don’t ask the right question, you get no answer.”

“And what would the right question have been?”

“If you asked him who first sang ‘Lady of the White-Spined City,’ he’d say he had no proper record, but hearsay had that the lady’s little girl made it. Hearsay, nothing – the Reizis are cousins, remember. We know where that song came from.”

“And the records?” But the answer didn’t seem to matter so much now.

Sayla’s gaze dropped to her mug. “A song’s one thing, and a bunch of old papers is another. Could be hers as well as anybody’s, I guess.”

Evriel took one shuddering breath, and then another. “I should very like to hear the rest of that ballad.”

“I’ll roust Asha – ”

“Do you sing?” Evriel paused, flushing, and started again. “I’d like to hear you sing it. If you would.”

Sayla gave her a long, measuring glance and shrugged. Straightening her shoulders she leaned back and began in a low, pure voice a song of a woman, beloved of the regent, who traveled the far domains. Yet only when she came to the backlands did she find a man she loved, and they married, rough country man and his lady wife.

Was it like that? It was not like that. She had not loved Japhesh at first sight, nor in anapestic tetrameter.

Sayla sang on, of how the backlands give fleetingly and take without regard, and so they took the lady’s husband. She, wild with white fury, scorned the tumbling hills and set sail again on the sea between the stars, promising never to return but with scourging fire for the mere planet that dared steal her lover away.

There Sayla stopped.

“Thank you,” said Evriel, voice catching. “It is...very dramatic, isn’t it?”

No mention of the barren loneliness? The icy fear not of living but of only existing, forever numb, on this world turned suddenly, wholly alien? No, nor the regret. Would Lakmi have guessed those things and left them unsung?

Sayla looked at her a moment, silent. Then, “Maybe it’s how she thought it should have been.”

Evriel closed her eyes. She waited for tears, or relief, or the murky shame that had swirled so long about her feet. *My daughter, look what I did to you.* She waited for Lakmi, beautiful and righteous, to appear before her and accuse. But she didn’t come. The silty tide of shame didn’t come.

Evriel prodded, waiting for the ache to bloom into familiar regret, familiar loss. It didn’t.

Finally she opened her eyes. “Thank you,” she repeated.

“It’s what you came for, then.”

“I – yes. Yes, it is.” A pause. Then, “But not the only thing.”

It was to have been a short stay.

Evriel said, “I wonder – would there be a need for another archivist, somewhere on the mountain?”

Sayla gave her another long, measuring look. “Your ship’ll be leaving.”

“Yes.” Evriel considered her words, tested them. “I lost a husband and a daughter here, and I might as well have left myself behind. I won’t make the mistake again.”

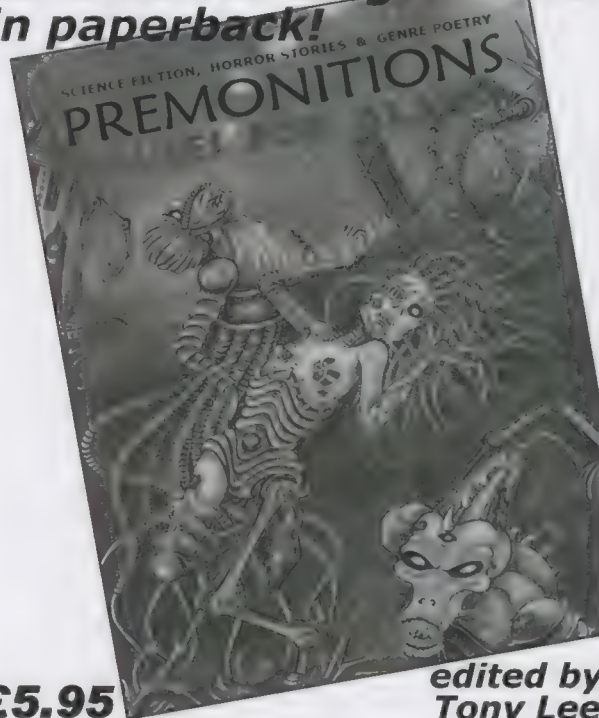
Sayla nodded slowly, not approving, quite, but acknowledging. Evriel found that that meant something to her.

Sayla rose, saying, “Time for Asha to be getting up and breakfast getting started.”

When she was gone, Evriel wrapped another robe around her, walked the cold stone hall to the door, and stepped out into the gleaming white. Soon she must sketch her plans, make lists of forms to fill, messages to send. It was no easy thing, retiring from the service of the regent. But for just a moment she would look again down the tumbling plains to the winding black thread of the Serra.

People keep asking **Sarah L. Edwards** what she’s going to do with her life, and she keeps answering, “Wouldn’t I like to know!” While she figures it out, she continues to write science fiction and fantasy, read a lot, knit (anybody need a scarf?), and wonder what to do with this math degree she just got. She has previously sold short fiction to *Writers of the Future XXIV*, *Baen’s Universe*, *Beneath Ceaseless Skies*, and other markets.

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It was a Wednesday. The in-car thermometer was registering forty degrees. Melodie held her bag on her lap, the red plastic pouch containing her most important possessions: the buff notepad and its blue pencil, the glass medallion, a blurred Polaroid photograph of her best friend Sara. She shifted in her seat, the bare flesh of her thigh making a sticking, ripping sound against the plastic. She watched the back of her mother's dark head, her father's large hands on the wheel.

"Not far to go now," said Douglas Craven. "I could do with a beer."

"Beer?" said Bella Craven. "We'll be lucky to get decent water, the way he lives." She turned to look at Doug, presenting her retroussé nose in delicate profile. The seatbelt cut a diagonal stripe across her arm. Melodie looked out of the window, not wanting to attract her attention. The fields swept yellow and flat towards the horizon.

"I'm still not sure this is a good idea," said Doug. "We should leave him to decide on his own."

"He's incapable of making decisions," said Bella. "He needs a doctor, if you ask me."

Melodie counted the fence posts at the side of the road. From a distance they looked sandwiched together like the matchsticks in a cribbage game, but as they came closer they appeared to separate, sliding apart as if on metal runners. The space ahead seemed to expand and fill with colour as they entered it, like the dried flowers her mother put into water as table decorations.

The man they were going to see was called Ballantine. She didn't know his first name, her parents had never mentioned it. She tried names out on him: Dunstan, Waverley, Beresford, names she had read in books and especially liked. She found a pleasure in unusual words. She liked the patterns they made in her head.

The fields gave way to a no-man's-land of bare earth with outcrops of rocky scrub. From time to time they passed a petrol station or a storage depot or a scattering of stone-built cottages. The cottages had mesh-covered windows and solar panels. There had been a toy tricycle outside one of them but Melodie found it hard to imagine what child might live there, so far from everyone else, so far from the city. Her mother leaned forward in her seat, groping for something in her handbag. The back of her dress was stained with sweat. They had been driving for more than three hours.

The road dipped and swerved, following the contours of the old river valley. The house appeared without warning. It occupied a position on what had once been the shore of a lake but was now a ragged shaft of land overlooking a vast cleft of soil choked with bramble and giant hogweed. It had once been white but was now a dingy grey. There were no other houses in sight.

Melodie had expected that Ballantine would be there waiting for them but the gravel drive was empty apart from a green Ford van. The van's chassis was mottled with rust and there was a thick coat of dust on the windscreen. It looked like nobody had driven it for weeks.

Her father brought the car to a standstill outside the house.

"I don't like the look of this," said Bella Craven. "I want Melodie to stay in the car." She clasped and unclasped her hands, twisting her rings.

"I want to play in the garden," Melodie said, although there was no garden to speak of, just some stunted bushes and a row of dented black oil drums. The thought of staying in the car appalled her.

"Let her stretch her legs," said her father. "She's been cooped up in here for hours and it's going to be a long drive back."

"You'd better not go running off, then. Make sure you stay close to the house." Bella unclipped her seatbelt. Her cheeks were flushed from the heat. They had made a rest stop an hour before. Doug had gone to the kiosk and bought some spam sandwiches and a carton of Long Life orange juice. Bella had taken Melodie to use the

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toilet but had not let her wash her hands or face because the rest stop didn't have a water certificate. "Come on," she said to Doug. "Let's get it over with."

Her shoes crunched on the gravel. Melodie scrambled from the back seat. The outside air smelled hot and heady, filled with the acrid odour of dry bracken and baking soil. She went to the edge of the drive and looked out over what had once been the lake. The red leaves of the hogweed seemed to ripple and soar towards her, the stems tangled and shiny like a mass of exposed electrical wiring. They smelled of scorching rubber. Melodie knew that if you broke the stems of hogweed the milky mess inside could burn your skin. She held her purse to her chest with both arms and stepped back onto the path.

She felt nervous in spite of herself. She wondered where Ballantine was. Her mother had said he needed a doctor and she wondered if he had perhaps gone into town to find one. Her father had said there was a town close by, what had used to be the river port, although there wasn't much to see there now.

The house had no doorbell, just a tarnished brass knocker in the shape of a lion's head. Her mother knocked hard three times, just as Melodie had seen a policewoman do in one of the film dramas on the crime channel. Melodie was forbidden to watch the crime channel, but her mother occasionally forgot to reset the parental controls on her computer. There were three echoes, like distant gunshots, and then there was silence.

"He's obviously not here," said Doug. "He must have cleared out weeks ago."

"No," said Bella. "He's in there. I can hear footsteps."

Then the door opened and there was Ballantine. Melodie knew him at once as if she had dreamed him, created him herself from only his name. He was of medium height, with thinning grey-brown hair and a prominent nose that jutted from his face like the beak of an eagle. His eyes were a watery blue. He was wearing a pair of shapeless grey trousers in a tweed fabric that seemed quite unsuitable for the weather. One of his shirt buttons was missing. It had been replaced with a safety pin.

"Bella," he said. "What are you doing here?" His voice was soft and low and Melodie had to strain to hear what he was saying. He stepped backwards, blocking the doorway. Bella folded her arms across her chest.

"Can't we come in?" she said. "We could all do with something to drink." She barged forward, perhaps trying to catch him off guard, but Ballantine did not move. He looked past her down the drive, fixing his eyes on Doug, Doug's car, the green Ford van. When he saw Melodie he seemed to recoil.

"You can't use the water," he said to Bella. "We've had notices. We were cut off for most of last week."

"God," said Bella. "I presume you have bottled?"

"I'm almost out," said Ballantine. "The van's been playing up."

"We'll have to go into town then." She sighed. "Is there anything else you need?"

He looked down at his feet. His shoes were dusty and cracked. "No," he said. "I don't think so."

Bella sighed again, more loudly. "Get moving," she said to Melodie. "Back in the car."

Melodie's heart sank. She wouldn't have minded seeing the town, where her father had said there used to be a naval base and a canning factory, but the thought of the sweltering car was close to torture. She knew she would be car sick, and the thought of this was more upsetting than the thought of being left alone with Ballantine. She wondered what he would do if that happened, whether he might try to speak to her.

You don't have to reply if he does, she thought. *You can sit here in the drive and look at the road.* "I'm boiling," she said. "I want to stay here." She scraped her sandal against the gravel, making a line in the dust like a capital 'i'.

"She'll be all right, Bee," said her father. "We'll only be gone half an hour."

Bella inhaled sharply and seemed on the point of insisting then for some reason changed her mind. "Come here," she said. "I don't want you going into the house." She dug in her handbag and brought out a tube of sunblock. It smelled rank and sulphurous, like the oil in a can of pilchards. Her mother rubbed palmfuls of the stuff into her arms and shoulders and neck. Her hat cast a circular shadow like a hole in the ground.

She held Melodie at arm's length for a moment then nodded and got into the car. Melodie sat down on the stubble and watched the car driving away. She had seldom been left on her own. She wondered what she would do if the car never returned. The thought was terrifying but curiously thrilling and full of possibilities. It seemed to give her a new sense of herself, opening regions of her imagination she had caught glimpses of but never truly inhabited.

She glanced over towards the house. The front door was standing ajar but there was no sign of Ballantine. She thought about the way he had looked at her, a mixture of terror and joy. It was as if he recognised her but she knew this was impossible. Ballantine didn't know her. She had never seen him before in her life.

Suddenly he appeared. He was holding something in his hands, a glass full of some cloudy liquid. He began walking towards her. Melodie felt herself stiffen. She drew her arms up around her knees. Her skin prickled in the heat. She reeked heavily of sunscreen.

He came and stood in front of her.

"Would you like a drink?" he said. "You must be very thirsty."

She had forgotten her thirst, but the sight of the glass brought it back. Her mouth and throat felt dusty and bone dry. He handed her the glass. It was tall and etched with flowers, cold and almost freezing to the touch. She smelled the tart yellow smell of lemons, making her stomach cramp and then release. The drink was sour-sweet and delicious. It foamed gently against her lips.

"There's more inside if you'd like some," he said. "It's too hot for you to sit out here."

She drained the glass to its dregs, wondering why Ballantine had not offered the lemonade to her parents. She felt a small shiver of pleasure at the thought that she and Ballantine already had a secret together. Her mother had not wanted her to go in the house, but she had not expressly forbidden it. She stood up and followed him inside.

The hallway was dark and shaded. There were pictures on the walls, enlarged photographs of centipedes and spiders, a bumblebee hovering in midair.

"The bumblebee can't fly, did you know that?" he said. "Conventional science says it's impossible."

"We learned that in school last year," she said. "What's your name?"

"My name is Lindsay," said Ballantine. "What's yours?"

"Melodie. Melodie Craven." She had always thought Lindsay was a girl's name but it suited him anyway. She liked the sound of it, the way the 'd' pressed against the 's' as you pushed the tip of your tongue to the back of your teeth.

"Go through," he said. "I won't be a moment."

The main room overlooked the back of the house. Cloth blinds masked the upper parts of the windows, and a wooden ceiling fan, shaped like the propeller of a small aircraft, took off

the worst of the heat. There was a long, low couch covered with a tartan blanket, a tall glass-fronted cabinet crammed with books and what looked like the lever arch files that some of her older classmates used for storing their homework. She was aware of an absence of dust. Closest to the window stood a narrow oblong table scattered with a variety of small, shiny objects: glass Petri dishes, triangular flasks filled with translucent liquids, tweezers and a pair of scissors, the narrow blades half-open in a steel-blue 'v'. She recognised many of the objects from school, although as an arts prelim she had never been allowed to touch them. She found the object at the centre of the table especially fascinating. It had a long tubular barrel and a viewfinder and was made of some dark, non-reflective metal. There was a platform half-way up, with levers and clips jutting out from it at right angles. The machine looked both interesting and dangerous, reminding her in some fashion of the things in the school medical suite: the heart monitors and dental equipment, the miniature camera that could be inserted into your body through a tube passed down through the throat.

She had once vowed to herself that no-one would ever touch her with those things, that she would die first.

"That's a microscope," she said.

"That's right," said Ballantine. He had come up behind her with scarcely a sound. Close to he looked younger. He was carrying a tin tray with another glass of lemonade on it and a plate of some oatmeal biscuits. She noticed how thin he was, as if his body as well as the landscape had been eroded by the hot wind and sand. She drained the second glass as quickly as the first although her thirst was less urgent. She replaced it on the tray and out of politeness took one of the cookies. Its texture was gritty, like birdseed, although the taste was not unpleasant. There was a microscope at school, but only a very small number of pupils were allowed to go near it.

"What's it for?" she said. "The microscope?"

"It's for exploring the hidden universe," he said. "The microcosmos. Would you like me to show you how it works?"

She nodded. He was examining her with that strange look again, the look that said he knew her. His expression unnerved her but it excited her too. It made her feel important.

He put the tray down at the end of the bench, then taking a glass pipette he extracted a measure of liquid from one of the vials.

"This is ordinary rain water," he said. "From the barrels outside." He nodded towards the window, and Melodie remembered the oil drums lined up along the back of the house. There had been no rain for several weeks. The water in the barrels would be filthy by now, undrinkable without straining and boiling, reduced to a greenish sludge. Ballantine lifted the lid from a long plywood box that looked a little like one of the cigar boxes her father used to store paperclips and other desk stationery. It contained hundreds of small glass rectangles all of an identical size. They reminded her of the massed ranks of lenses in an optician's window.

Ballantine squeezed a single drop of water from the pipette onto one of the pieces of glass. Then he placed another piece on top of it, a wafer-thin circle the size of a thumbnail.

"That's the cover slip," he said. "It holds everything in place. The larger sheet underneath is called a slide."

He laid the slide on the viewing platform and secured it with the metal clips.

"You'll need this," he said. "Here."

He pulled a high varnished stool from under the table and indicated that she should kneel on it. The wood felt warm and smooth against her knees. She put her eye to the viewfinder. At first there was nothing, just a circular field of brightness, as when you viewed a blank transparency through a light projector. Then suddenly there was movement, a haphazard, frantic scrabbling, as of some small rodent or other verminous animal, a tight burst of energy that seemed somehow to flow in every direction at once.

She gasped and drew away from the viewfinder. The glass slide and its securing clips were undisturbed. What she had seen was impossible, monstrous. She felt a single bead of sweat loosen itself from between her shoulder blades and begin to creep along the runnel of her spine.

"Take your time," said Ballantine, smiling. "You need to get your eye in." He reached out and took her hand, placing her fingers on a small grooved disc at the base of the lens. "This adjusts the focus," he said.

She practised twisting the dial. She could see things in the water, spools of a greenish threadlike substance and bulbous brown spores that Ballantine said were a kind of algae. All these things interested her but it was the other thing she was looking for, the thrashing transparent monstrosity she had glimpsed before. Suddenly it shot into view. She could see now how it moved, propelling itself along with the spidery, whip-like tentacles that grew along the margins of its body. There were shadowy shapes inside it, coils and wisps of blue and red that could have been veins or some kind of rudimentary internal organs.

The fact of the thing astounded her. She found it difficult to comprehend, that it existed and played out its life, but without the means of the microscope she might never have known it was there.

"What's it called?" she said to Ballantine.

"A paramecium," he said. "A slipper animal."

"Do you think it sees us?" she said. "Does it know it's trapped under the glass?"

Ballantine moved to stand beside her. His long shadow fell across the microscope, darkening her field of vision. "That's an interesting question," he said. "I should think we're light years from any kind of reasonable answer." He reached out and touched her hair. It was a kind touch, the merest hint of a caress, but it disturbed her to have him so close. She drew back from his hand, thinking about the slipper animal. It occurred to her that a single barrel of water might contain millions of them; an invisible city, a universe, a microcosmos of unseeable beings.

What can we know of them? she thought. *We might never have an answer.*

"Do you know who you look like?" Ballantine said. "You look like your Aunt Chantal."

Chantal was her mother's younger sister. Melodie had always known she had an aunt, but Bella had always told her she lived abroad. Then one evening at the end of winter she had come to the house. Melodie had just had time to take in her aunt's fair head and narrow waist, the black bag she had with her that looked like a doctor's bag, and then she had been sent to her

room. Downstairs there had been supper and there had been an argument. Her mother had done most of the talking. Melodie had heard her shouting from the top of the stairs.

She knew that Chantal meant singer, that her aunt's name had to do with music, like Melodie's own.

"I've never met her," she said to Ballantine. She put her eye back to the viewfinder. To her surprise there were now two slipper animals. They confronted one another for a moment, then slid noiselessly past, like two buses on a narrow road. The idea that Ballantine knew her aunt somehow was thrilling and dangerous, like something in a spy story. It seemed to bind them together in some mysterious, underground way.

"What will you do with the creatures once we've finished looking at them?"

"I don't know," he said. "What would you like me to do with them?"

"Put them back in the water outside."

"All right," he said. "I will."

"They look like monsters."

"Invisible monsters." He picked up the flask with the rest of the water and held it up to the light. "We're surrounded by them."

There was the sound of a car outside. Ballantine moved quickly away from her and crossed through into the hall. Melodie got down from the stool. She listened to the low, puttering hum of the engine, the slide and crunch of wheels on gravel. There was the sound of a car door slamming and then her mother's voice, raised in anger.

"What have you done with my daughter?"

Ballantine answered, his tone low and measured. She couldn't make out what he said. A moment later her mother appeared. She was wearing the mirror sunglasses she kept in the glove compartment. They made her look young and hard. It was impossible to gauge her mood.

"I thought I told you not to go in the house?"

"It was hot in the drive," said Melodie. "Mr Ballantine said it would be safer if I came inside."

She dropped the word *safer* with a soft thud, the ace she had kept hidden in her hand. Her mother hesitated then shrugged. She turned away then, and Melodie knew she had got away with it, that Bella Craven had decided to let her disobedience go unpunished. She was carrying a nylon string bag, its narrow blue handles twisted about her fingers. The bag was full of provisions. Melodie saw the stained greaseproof paper that meant there was some kind of meat.

The kitchen was a brick-built extension, tacked onto the side of the house like an outside privy or a coal store. There was a concrete floor and a scrubbed pine table, an enormous stained porcelain sink. The fridge was vast and upright, like a steel coffin turned on its end. The inside was stacked with glass jam jars, full of what looked like mud.

"You shouldn't keep food in here," said Bella. Red patches stood out on her cheeks.

"It's perfectly safe," said Ballantine. "There's nothing to worry about."

Bella stepped up to the table and began to unload the provisions. When she turned on the tap above the sink a trickle of brownish water spluttered out. Melodie watched as she rinsed the potatoes and carrots, working at the dirt with the pads of

her fingers. She was surprised to see her using the water straight from the tap. At home she boiled everything.

Her father came in from the car carrying two cases of bottled water. He steadied himself against the doorpost, easing one of the cartons onto the floor.

"Don't leave it there, Doug," said Bella. "It'll get in the way."

The meal was served in the dining room, which was a curtained alcove just off the hallway. The meat was leathery and a little salty but Bella had done her best with it, steeping it in a sauce made from onions and the orange Ceps mushrooms that for some reason had been plentiful in the town. Bella Craven had always been able to make a little go a long way. She prided herself on that fact.

They ate in near-silence. At one point Doug asked Ballantine if he could get a radio signal at the house, and Ballantine said he could, though it was intermittent.

"I don't really miss it, though," he said. "Except for the music."

Melodie finished her food and then asked if she could go to the bathroom. She felt anxious without knowing why. The bathroom was at the end of the hallway, a narrow closet of the old-fashioned type that used a sandbox instead of the new chemicals. Beside the closet a steep flight of steps led to the upper floor. At the top of the stairs was a long landing with a window at either end and two rooms leading off. In one room a large hooded perambulator stood under the window, surrounded by stacks of packing cases. The other contained a large iron bedstead and was obviously where Ballantine slept. There was a photograph on the night stand, a woman with light hair and a birthmark high up on one cheek.

Melodie crept back down the stairs. From the dining room she could hear her mother, her voice lowered but bitter with complaint. Through a gap in the curtain she could see all three of them around the table, the welter of dirty dishes pushed to one side.

"I'm only here because Chantal made me promise," said Bella Craven. "Don't you go thinking I like it."

"Aren't you going to tell me how she is?" said Ballantine. "I'm presuming you intercepted all my letters." There was a force of violence in his voice that hadn't been there before. His eagle's face looked stricken, his pale eyes coldly crystalline. He leaned forward as he spoke, one hand making a fist.

"She's recovering, no thanks to you," said Bella. "She doesn't want to see you again."

"I don't believe you."

"It's a wonder she hasn't gone crazy," said Bella. "You and your insane life, your foul experiments." She sounded close to tears. Melodie remembered the last time she had seen her mother cry, when she had run over a cat that had been crossing the road in front of their house. She had screamed at Melodie, who had been in the back seat of the car looking at the road atlas. She liked the road atlas, with its coloured symbols for churches and wind farms and viaducts, the journeys you could go on simply by turning the page.

"Chantal isn't crazy," said Ballantine. "She has a brilliant mind, which you have done your best to stifle."

"Let's stop this," said Douglas Craven. "This isn't going to do any good." He tried to take his wife's hand but she pulled it away. "Will you come back with us tonight?" he said to Ballantine.

"You'd be much better off in the city. This isn't a good place to be."

Ballantine turned to him, his piercing eyes softening a little. "Thank you Doug, but this is my home."

"This is hopeless," said Bella. "Vile. I knew we should never have come here. Where in God's name is Melodie?"

Melodie coughed loudly and came back through the curtain. The three adults turned to look at her.

"We're leaving," said Bella. "Get yourself into the car." She started to clear the table. Doug Craven rubbed at his eyes.

"I'll just go and check the lights," he said.

Then it was just the two of them. He stared at her, seemingly entranced. For a second she was afraid he might grab hold of her but at the last minute his resolve appeared to desert him. His hands fell limp to his sides.

"Wait," he said. "Wait here." He disappeared into the hall. Melodie waited, listening to the sound of her mother loading the dishes into the steam cleaner. In a few moments Ballantine returned. He held something out to her, a square white envelope. There was no name written on the envelope, though she could feel there was something inside it, several sheets of paper folded in half.

"Will you do something for me?" he said. He leaned forward slightly, putting his face close to hers. "Will you give this to your aunt when you next see her? It doesn't matter when that is. It doesn't matter if it's years from now. Just give her this and tell her it came from me."

The blue of his eyes was shimmering, lucent, a pale bright turquoise. Melodie took the letter and put it inside her purse. Ballantine touched the top of her head, so gently she could barely feel his hand.

"It's like seeing her face," he said. "It's almost as if you were sent."

Suddenly her mother appeared. She pulled Melodie against her, snatching at her shoulders and arms. Her hands were damp with steam.

"Into the car," she said to her. To Ballantine she said nothing at all. Melodie went outside. Her father was standing by the car. As she watched he came over to Ballantine and handed him something, a small bundle that might have been money.

"Think about what I said," he said. "If you need anything just call." Then he got into the car. From the back seat Melodie saw him put his hand on his wife's knee but Bella refused to look at him.

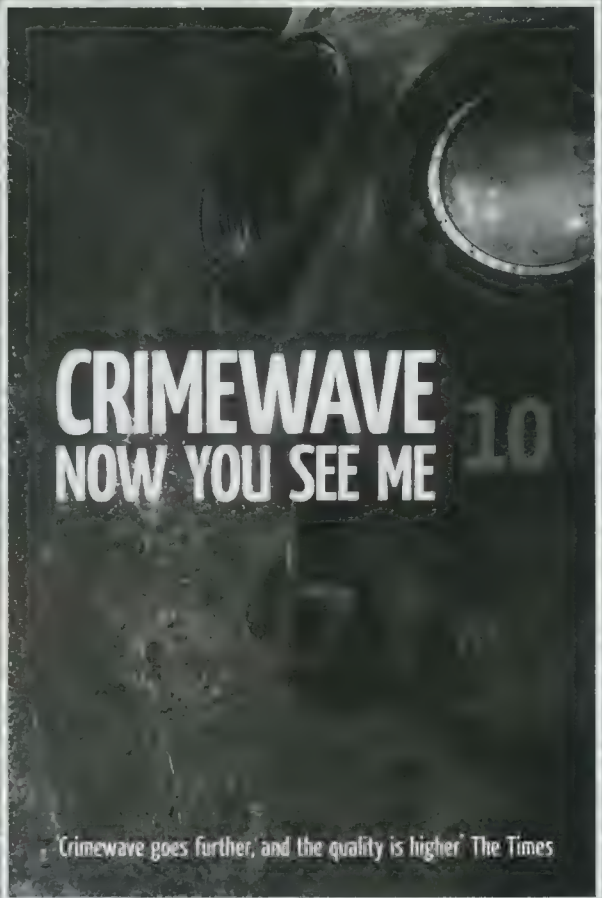
The engine coughed into life. The wheels caught on the gravel and they were away. Melodie gazed back at the house. Ballantine was still standing there, looking towards the car, looking at her. She hugged her red plastic purse and said his name to herself, touching the back of her teeth with the tip of her tongue.

It began to get dark. They drove for more than an hour until at last the lights of the rest stop glimmered up towards them through the dusk. Her father parked the car and they got out. Melodie stood on the cracked tarmac breathing in the smells of diesel and scorched undergrowth. She wondered if Ballantine were still standing there in the doorway, looking out on the bramble and nettles that had once been the lake. She wondered what moved in its depths, what invisible monsters. What secrets that might yet come forth. ■

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Allette de Bodard

VS

illustrated by Mark Sexton

September, and the wind blows Françoise back to Quimper, to roam the cramped streets of the Old City amidst squalls of rain.

She shops for clothes, planning the colours of the baby's room; ambles along the deserted bridges over the canals, breathing in the smell of brine and wet ivy. But all the while she's aware that she's only playing a game with herself – she knows she's only pretending that she hasn't seen the goddess.

It's hard to forget the goddess – that cold radiance that blew salt into Françoise's hair, the dress that shimmered with all the colours of sunlight on water, the sharp glimmer of steel in her hand.

You carry my child, the goddess had said, and it was so. It had always been so.

Except, of course, that Stéphane hadn't understood. He'd seen it as a betrayal, blaming her for not taking the pill as she should have – oh, not overtly, he was too stiff-necked and too well-educated for that, but all the same, she'd heard the words he wasn't saying, in every gesture, in every pained smile.

So she left. So she came back here, hoping to see Gaëtan. If there's anyone who knows about goddesses and myths, it's Gaëtan, who used to go from house to house writing down legends from Brittany. But Gaëtan isn't here, isn't answering her calls. Maybe he's off on another humanitarian mission, incommunicado again, as he's so often been.

Françoise's cell phone rings – but it's only the alarm clock, reminding her that she has to work out at the gym before her appointment with the obstetrician.

With a sigh, she turns towards the nearest bus stop, fighting a rising wave of nausea.

.....
"It's a boy," the obstetrician says, staring at the sonographs laid out on his desk.

Françoise, who has been readjusting the straps of her bra, hears the reserve in his voice. "There's something else I should know?"

He doesn't answer for a while. At last he looks up, his grey eyes carefully devoid of all feelings. His bad-news face, she guesses. "Have you...held back on something, Ms Martin? In your family's medical history?"

A hollow forms in her stomach, draining the warmth from her limbs. "What do you mean?"

"Nothing to worry about," he says, slowly, and she can hear the *not yet* he's not telling her. "You'll have to make an appointment with a cardiologist. For a fetal echocardiograph."

She's not stupid. She read books about pregnancies, when it became obvious that she couldn't bring herself to abort – to kill an innocent child. She knows about echocardiographs, and that the prognosis is not good. "Birth defect?" she asks, from some remote place in her mind.

He sits, all prim and stiff – what she wouldn't give to shake him out of his complacency. "Congenital heart defect. Most probably a deformed organ. It won't pump enough blood into the veins."

"But you're not sure." He's sending her for further tests. It

means there's a way out, doesn't it? It means...

He doesn't answer, but she reads his reply in his gaze all the same. He's ninety-percent sure, but he will still do the tests, to confirm.

She leaves the surgery, feeling...cold. Empty. In her hands is a thick cream envelope: her sonographs, and the obstetrician's diagnosis neatly typed and folded alongside.

Possibility of heart deformation, the paper notes, dry, uncaring.

Back in her apartment, she takes the sonographs out, spreads them on the bed. They look...well, it's hard to tell. There's the trapeze shape of the womb, and the white outline of the baby – the huge head, the body curled up. Everything looks normal.

If only she could fool herself. If only she was dumb enough to believe her own stories.

Evening falls over Quimper – she hears the bells of the nearby church tolling for Vespers. She settles at her working table, and starts working on her sketches again.

It started as something to occupy her, and now it's turned into an obsession. With pencil and charcoal she rubs in new details, with the precision she used to apply to her blueprints – and then withdraws, to stare at the paper.

The goddess stares back at her, white and terrible and smelling of things below the waves. The goddess as she appeared, hovering over the sand of Douarnenez Bay, limned by the morning sun: great and terrible and alien.

Françoise's hands are shaking. She clenches her fingers, unclenches them, and waits until the tremors have passed.

This is real. This is now, and the baby is a boy, and it's not normal. It's never been normal.

.....
That night, as on every night, Françoise dreams that she walks once more on the beach at Douarnenez, hearing the drowned bells tolling the midnight hour. The sand is cold, crunching under her bare feet.

She stands before the sea, and the waves part, revealing stone buildings eaten by kelp and algae, breached seawalls where lobsters and crabs scuttle. Everything is still dripping with brine, and the wind in her ears is the voice of the storm.

The goddess is waiting for her, within the largest building – in a place that must once have been a throne room. She sits in a chair of rotten wood, lounging on it like a sated cat. Beside her is a greater chair, made of stone, but it's empty.

"You have been chosen," she says, her words the roar of the waves. "Few mortals can claim such a distinction."

I don't want to be chosen, Françoise thinks, as she thinks on every night. But it's useless. She can't speak – she hasn't been brought here for that. Just so that the goddess can look at her, trace the minute evolutions in her body, the progress of the pregnancy.

In the silence, she hears the baby's heartbeat, a pulse that's so quick it's bound to falter. She hears the obstetrician's voice: *the heart is deformed*.

"My child," the goddess says, and she's smiling. "The city of Ys will have its heir at last."

An heir to nothing. An heir to rotten wood, to algae-encrusted panels, to a city of fish and octopi and bleached skeletons. An heir with no heart.

He won't be born, Françoise thinks. He won't live. She tries to scream at the goddess, but it's not working. She can't open her mouth; her lips are stuck, frozen.

"Your reward will be great, never fear," the goddess says. Her face is as pale as those of drowned sailors, and her lips purple, as if she were perpetually cold.

I fear. But the words still won't come.

The goddess waves a hand, dismissive. She's seen all that she needs to see; and Françoise can go back, back into the waking world.

She wakes up to a bleary light filtering through the slits of her shutters. Someone is insistently knocking on the door – and a glance at the alarm clock tells her it's eleven a.m., and that once more she's overslept. She ought to be too nauseous with the pregnancy to get much sleep, but the dreams with the goddess are screwing up her body's rhythm.

She gets up – too fast, the world is spinning around her. She steadies herself on the bedside table, waiting for the feeling to subside. Her stomach aches fiercely.

"A minute!" she calls, as she puts on her dressing-gown, and sheathes her feet in slippers.

Through the Judas hole of the door, she can only see a dark silhouette, but she'd know that posture anywhere – a little embarrassed, as if he were intruding on a party he's not been invited to.

Gaëtan.

She throws the door open. "You're back," she says.

"I just got your message –" He stops, abruptly. His grey eyes stare at her, taking in, no doubt, the bulge of her belly and her puffy face. "I'd hoped you were joking." His voice is bleak.

"You know me better than that, don't you?" Françoise asks.

Gaëtan shrugs, steps inside, his beige trench coat dripping water on the floor. Raining again. Not an unusual occurrence in Brittany. "Been a long time," he says.

He sits on the sofa while she tries to explain what has happened – when she gets to Douarnenez and the goddess walking out of the sea, her voice stumbles, trails off. Gaëtan looks at her, his face gentle: the same face he must show to the malnourished Africans who come to him as their last hope. He doesn't judge – doesn't scream or accuse her like Stéphane – and somewhere in her she finds the strength to go on.

After she's done, Gaëtan slowly puts the glass on the table, and steeples his fingers together, raising them to his mouth. "Ys," he says. "What have you got yourself into?"

"Like I had a choice." Françoise can't quite keep the acidity out of her voice.

"Sorry." Gaëtan hasn't moved – he's still thinking, it seems. It's never been like him to act or speak rashly. "It's an old tale around here, you know."

Françoise knows. That's the reason why she came back here. "You haven't seen these," she says. She goes to her working desk, and picks up the sketches of the goddess, with the drowned city in the background.

Gaëtan lays them on the low table before him, carefully sliding

his glass out of the way. "I see." He runs his fingers on the goddess's face, very carefully. "You always had a talent for drawing. You shouldn't have chosen the machines over the landscapes and animals, you know."

It's an old, old tale; an old, old decision made ten years ago, and that she's never regretted. Except...except that the mere remembrance of the goddess's face is enough to scatter the formulas she made her living by; to render any blueprint, no matter how detailed, utterly meaningless. "Not the point," she says, finally – knowing that whatever happens next, she cannot go back to being an engineer.

"No, I guess not. Still..." He looks up at her, sharply. "You haven't talked about Stéphane."

"Stéphane...took it badly," she says, finally.

Gaëtan's face goes as still as sculptured stone. He doesn't say anything; he doesn't need to.

"You never liked him," Françoise says, to fill the silence – a silence that seems to have the edge of a drawn blade.

"No," Gaëtan says. "Let's leave it at that, shall we?" He turns his gaze back to the sketches, with visible difficulty. "You know who your goddess is."

Françoise shrugs. She's looked around on the Internet, but there wasn't much about the city of Ys. Or rather, it was always the same legend. "The Princess of Ys," she said. "She who took a new lover every night – and who had them killed every morning. She whose arrogance drowned the city beneath the waves."

Gaëtan nods. "Ahez," he says.

"To me she's the goddess." And it's true. Such things as her don't seem as though they should have a name, a handle back to the familiar. She cannot be tamed; she cannot be vanquished. She will not be cheated.

Gaëtan is tapping his fingers against the sketches, repeatedly jabbing his index into the eyes of the goddess. "They say Princess Ahez became a spirit of the sea after she drowned." He's speaking carefully, inserting every word with the meticulous care of a builder constructing an edifice on unstable ground. "They say you can still hear her voice in the Bay of Douarnenez, singing a lament for Ys – damn it, this kind of thing just shouldn't be happening, Françoise!"

Françoise shrugs. She rubs her hands on her belly, wondering if she's imagining the heartbeat coursing through her extended skin – a beat that's already slowing down, already faltering.

"Tell that to him, will you?" she says. "Tell him he shouldn't be alive." Not that it will ever get to be much of a problem, anyway – it's not as if he has much chance of surviving his birth.

Gaëtan says nothing for a while, then asks, "You want my advice?"

Françoise sits on a chair, facing him. "Why not?" At least it will be constructive, not like Stéphane's anger.

"Go away," Gaëtan says. "Get as far as you can from Quimper, as far as you can from the sea. Ahez's power lies in the sea. You should be safe."

Should. She stares at him, and sees what he's not telling her. "You're not sure."

"No," Gaëtan says. He shrugs. "I'm not an expert in magic and ghosts, and beings risen from the sea. I'm just a doctor."

"You're all I have," Françoise says, finally – the words she never told him after she started going out with Stéphane.

"Yeah," Gaëtan says. "Some leftovers."

Françoise rubs a hand on her belly again, feeling distinctly the chill that emanates from it: the coldness of beings drowned beneath the waves. "Even if it worked... I can't run away from the sea all my life, Gaëtan."

"You mean you don't want to run away, full stop."

A hard certainty rises within her – the same harshness that she felt when the obstetrician told her about the congenital heart defect. "No," she says. "I don't want to run away."

"Then what do you intend to do?" Gaëtan's voice is brimming with anger. "She's immortal, Françoise. She was a sorceress who could summon the devil himself in the heyday of Ys. You're –"

She knows what she is, all of it. Or does she? Once she was a student, then an engineer and a bride. Now she's none of this – just a woman pregnant with a baby that's not hers. "I'm what I am," she says, finally. "But I know one other thing she is, Gaëtan, one power she doesn't have: she's barren."

Gaëtan cocks his head. "Not quite barren," he says. "She can create life."

"Life needs to be sustained," Françoise says, a growing certainty within her. She remembers the rotting planks of the palace in Ys – remembers the cold, cold radiance of the goddess. "She can't do that. She can't nurture anything." Hell, she cannot even create – not a proper baby with a functioning heart.

"She can still blast you out of existence if she feels like it."

Françoise says nothing.

At length Gaëtan says, "You're crazy, you know." But he's capitulated already – she hears it in his voice. He doesn't speak for a while. "Your dreams – you can't speak in them."

"No. I can't do anything."

"She's summoned you," Gaëtan says. He's not the doctor any more, but the folklorist, the boy who'd seek out old wives and listen to their talk for hours on end. "That's why. You come to Ys only at her bidding. You have no power of your own."

Françoise stares at him. She says, slowly, the idea taking shape as she's speaking, "Then I'll come to her. I'll summon her myself."

His face twists. "She'll still be – she's power incarnate, Françoise. Maybe you'll be able to speak, but that's not going to change the outcome."

Françoise thinks of the sonographs and of Stéphane's angry words – of her blueprints folded away in her Paris flat, the meaningless remnants of her old life. "There's no choice. I can't go on like this, Gaëtan. I can't –" She's crying now, tears running down her face, leaving tingling marks on her cheeks. "I can't – go – on."

Gaëtan's arms close around her. He holds her against his chest, briefly, awkwardly, a bulwark against the great sobs that shake her chest.

"I'm sorry," she says, finally, when she's spent all her tears. "I don't know what came over me."

Gaëtan pulls away from her. His gaze is fathomless. "You've hoarded them for too long," he says.

"I'm sorry," Françoise says, again. She spreads out her hands – feeling empty, drained of tears and of every other emotion. "But if there's a way out – and that's the only one there seems to be – I'll take it. I have to."

"You're assuming I can tell you how to summon Ahez," Gaëtan

says, carefully.

She can read the signs; she knows what he's dangling before her: a possibility that he can give her, but that he doesn't approve of. It's clear in the set of his jaw, in the slightly aloof way he holds himself. "But you can, can't you?"

He won't meet her gaze. "I can tell you what I learnt of Ys," he says at last. "There's a song and a pattern to be drawn in the sand, for those who would open the gates of the drowned city..." He checks himself with a start. "It's an old wives' tale, Françoise. I've never seen it work."

"Ys is an old wives' tale. And so is Ahez. And I've seen them both. Please, Gaëtan. At worst, it won't work and I'll look like a fool."

Gaëtan's voice is sombre. "The worst is if it works. You'll be dead." But his gaze is still angry, and his hands clenched in his lap; and she knows she's won, that he'll give her what she wants.

Angry or not, Gaëtan still insists on coming with her. He drives her in his battered old Citroën on the small country roads to Douarnenez, and parks the car below a flickering lamplight.

Françoise walks down the dunes, keeping her gaze on the vast expanse of the ocean. In her hands she holds her only weapons: in her left hand, the paper with the pattern Gaëtan made her trace two hours ago; in her right hand, the sonographs the obstetrician gave her this morning – the last scrap of science and reason that's left to her, the only seawall she can build against Ys and the goddess.

It's like being in her dream once more: the cold, white sand crunching under her sandals; the stars and the moon shining on the canvas of the sky; and the roar of the waves filling her ears to bursting. As she reaches the bottom of the beach – the strip of wet sand left by the retreating tide, where it's easier to draw patterns – the baby moves within her, kicking against the skin of her belly.

Soon, she thinks. Soon. Either way, it will soon be over, and the knot of fear within her chest will vanish.

Gaëtan is standing by her side, one hand on her shoulder. "You know there's still time..."

She shakes her head. "It's too late for that. Five months ago was the last time I had a choice in the matter, Gaëtan."

He shrugs, angrily. "Go on, then."

Françoise kneels in the sand, carefully, oh so carefully. She lays the cream envelope with the sonographs by her side, and positions the paper with the pattern so that the moonlight falls full onto it, leaving no shadow on its lines. To draw her pattern, she's brought a Celtic dagger with a *triskell* on the hilt – bought in a souvenir shop on the way to the beach.

Gaëtan is kneeling as well, staring intently at the pattern. His right hand closes over Françoise's hand, just over the dagger's hilt. "This is how you draw," he says.

His fingers move, drawing Françoise's hand with them. The dagger goes down, sinks into the sand – there's some resistance, but it seems to melt away before Gaëtan's controlled gestures.

He draws line upon line, the beginning of the pattern, curves that meet to form walls and streets. And as he draws, he speaks: "We come here to summon Ys out of the sea. May Saint Corentin, who saved King Gradlon from the waves, watch over us; may the church bells toll not for our deaths. We come here to summon

Ys out of the sea.”

And, as he finishes his speech, he draws one last line, and completes his half of the pattern. Slowly, carefully, he opens his hand, leaving Françoise alone in holding the dagger.

Her turn.

She whispers, “We come here to summon Ys out of the sea. May Saint Corentin, who saved King Gradlon...” She closes her eyes for a moment, feeling the weight of the dagger in her hand – a last chance to abandon, to leave the ritual incomplete.

But it's too late for that.

With the same meticulousness she once applied to her blueprints, the same controlled gestures that allowed her to draw the goddess from memory, she starts drawing on the sand.

Now there's no other noise but the breath of the sea – and, in counterpoint to it, the soft sounds she makes as she adds line upon line, curves that arc under her to form a triple spiral, curves that branch and split, the pattern blossoming like a flower under her fingers.

She remembers Gaëtan's explanations: here are the seawalls of Ys, and the breach that the waves made when Ahez, drunk with her own power, opened the gates to the ocean's anger; here are the twisting streets and avenues where revellers would dance until night's end, and the palace where Ahez brought her lovers – and, at the end of the spiral, here is the ravine where her trusted servants would throw the lovers' bodies in the morning. Here is...

There's no time any more where she is; no sense of her own body or of the baby growing within. Her world has shrunk to the dagger and the darkened lines she draws, each one falling into place with the inevitability of a bell-toll.

When she starts on the last few lines, Gaëtan's voice starts speaking the words of power: the Breton words that summon Ahez and Ys from their resting-place beneath the waves.

“Ur pales kaer tost d'ar sklujoi

“Eno, en aour hag en perlez

“Evel an heol a bar Ahez.”

A beautiful palace by the seawalls

There, in gold and in pearls

Like the sun gleams Ahez.

His voice echoes in the silence, as if he were speaking above a bottomless chasm. He starts speaking them again – and again and again, the Breton words echoing each other until they become a string of meaningless syllables.

Françoise has been counting carefully, as he told her to. On the ninth repetition, she joins him. Her voice rises to mingle with Gaëtan's: thin, reedy, as fragile as a stream of smoke carried by the wind – and yet every word vibrates in the air, quivers as if drawing on some immeasurable power.

“Ur pales kaer tost d'ar sklujoi

“Eno, en aour hag en perlez

“Evel an heol a bar Ahez.”

Their words echo in the silence. At last, at long last, she rises, the pattern under her complete, and she's back in her body now, the sand's coldness seeping into her legs, her heart beating faster and faster within her chest – and there's a second, weaker heartbeat entwined with hers.

Slowly, she rises, tucks the dagger into her trousers pocket. There's utter silence on the beach now, but it's the silence before

a storm. Moonlight falls upon the lines she's drawn, and remains trapped within them, until the whole pattern glows white.

“Françoise,” Gaëtan says behind her. There's fear in his voice.

She doesn't speak. She picks up the sonographs and goes down to the sea, until the waves lap at her feet – a deeper cold than that of the sand. She waits, knowing what is coming.

Far, far away, bells start tolling: the bells of Ys, answering her call. And in their wake the whole surface of the ocean is trembling, shaking like some great beast trying to dislodge a burden. Dark shadows coalesce under the sea, growing larger with each passing moment.

And then they're no longer shadows, but the bulks of buildings rising above the surface: massive stone walls encrusted with kelp, surrounding broken-down and rotted gates. The faded remnants of tabards adorn both sides of the gates, the drawings so eaten away Françoise can't make out their details.

The wind blows into her face the familiar smell of brine and decay, of algae and rotting wood: the smell of Ys.

Gaëtan, standing beside her, doesn't speak. Shock is etched on every line of his face.

“Let's go,” Françoise whispers – for there is something about the drowned city that commands silence, even when you are its summoner.

Gaëtan is looking at her and at the gates; at her and at the shimmering pattern drawn on the sand. “It shouldn't have worked,” he says, but his voice is very soft, already defeated. At length he shakes his head, and walks beside her as they enter the city of Ys.

Inside, skeletons lie in the streets, their arms still extended as if they could keep the sea at bay. A few crabs and lobsters scuttle away from them, the click-click of their legs on stone the only noise that breaks the silence.

Françoise tucks the sonographs under her arm – the cardboard envelope is wet and decomposing, as if the atmosphere of Ys spread rot to everything it touched. Gaëtan walks slowly, carefully. She can imagine how he feels – he, never one to take unconsidered risks, who now finds himself thrust into the leg-ends of his childhood.

She doesn't think, or dwell overmuch on what could go wrong. That way lies despair, and perdition. But she can't help hearing the baby's faint heartbeat – and imagining his blood draining from his limbs.

There's no one in the streets, no revellers to greet them, no merchants plying their trades on the deserted marketplace – not even ghosts to flitter between the ruined buildings. Ys is a dead city. No, worse than that: the husk of a city, long since deserted by both the dead and the living. But it hums with power, with an insistent beat that seeps through the soles of Françoise's shoes, with a rhythm that is the roar of the waves and the voice of the storm – and also a lament for all the lives lost to the ocean. As she walks, the rhythm penetrates deeper into her body, insinuating itself into her womb until it mingles with her baby's heartbeat.

Françoise knows where she's going: all she has to do is retrace her steps of the dream, to follow the streets until they widen into a large plaza; to walk between the six kelp-eaten statues that guard the entrance to the palace, between the gates torn off their hinges by the onslaught of the waves.

And then she and Gaëtan are inside, walking down corridors. The smell of mould is overbearing now, and Françoise can feel the beginnings of nausea in her throat. There's another smell, too, underlying everything, sweet and cloying, like a perfume worn for too long.

She knows who it belongs to. She wonders if the goddess has seen them come – but of course she has. Nothing in Ys escapes her overbearing power. She'll be at the centre, waiting for them, toying with their growing fear, revelling in their anguish.

No. Françoise mustn't think about this. She'll focus on the song in her mind and in her womb, the insidious song of Ys, and she won't think at all. She won't...

In silence they worm their way deeper into the cankered palace, stepping on moss and algae and the threadbare remnants of tapestries. Till at last they reach one last set of great gates – but these are of rusted metal, and the soldiers and sailors engraved on their panels are still visible, although badly marred by the sea.

The gates are closed – have been closed for a long time, the hinges buried under kelp and rust, the panels hanging askew. Françoise stops, the fatigue she's been ignoring so far creeping into the marrow of her bones.

Gaëtan has stopped too; he's running his fingers on the metal – pushing, desultorily, but the doors won't budge.

"What now?" he mouths.

The song is stronger now, draining Françoise of all thoughts, but at the same time lifting her into a different place, the same haven outside time as when she was drawing the pattern on the beach.

There are no closed doors in this place.

Françoise lays both hands on the panels and pushes. Something rumbles, deep within the belly of the city – a pain that is somehow in her own womb – and then the gates yield, and open with a loud creak.

Inside, the goddess is waiting for them.

The dream once more: the rotten chairs beside the rotten trestle tables, the warm stones under her feet. And, at the far end of the room, the goddess sitting in the chair on the dais, smiling as Françoise draws nearer.

"You are brave," she says, and her voice is that of the sea before the storm. "And foolish. Few dare to summon Ys from beneath the waves." She smiles again, revealing teeth the colour of nacre. "And fewer still return alive." She moves, with fluid, inhuman speed; comes to stand by Gaëtan, who has frozen, three steps below the empty chair. "But you brought a gift, I see."

Françoise drags her voice from an impossibly faraway place. "He's not yours."

"I choose as I please, and every man that comes into Ys is mine," the goddess says. She walks around Gaëtan, tilting his head upwards, watching him as she might watch a slave on the selling-block. There's a mask in her hand – a mask of black silk that seems to waver between her fingers.

That legend, too, Gaëtan told her. At dawn, after the goddess has had her pleasure, the mask will tighten until the man beneath dies of suffocation – one more sacrifice to slake her unending thirst.

Françoise is moving, without conscious thought, extending a hand and catching the mask before the goddess can put it on

Gaëtan's face. The mask clings to her fingers: cold and slimy, like the scales of a fish, but writhing against her skin like a maddened snake.

She meets the goddess's cold gaze, the same blinding radiance that silenced her within the dream. But now there's power in Françoise – the remnants of the magic she used to summon Ys – and the light is strong, but she can still see.

"You dare," the goddess hisses. "You whom I picked among mortals to be honoured –"

"I don't want to be honoured," Françoise says, slowly. The mask is crawling upwards, extending coils around the palm of her hand. She's about to say *I don't want your child* but that would be a lie – she kept the baby, after all, clung to him rather than to Stéphane. "What I want you can't give."

The goddess smiles. She hasn't moved. She's still standing there, at the heart of her city, secure in her power. "Who are you to judge what I can and can't give?"

The mask is at her wrist now. It leaves a tingling sensation where it passes, as if it had briefly cut off the flow of blood in her body. Françoise tries not to think of what will happen when it reaches her neck – tries not to fear. Instead, as calmly as she can, she extends the envelope to the goddess. When she moves, the mask doesn't fall off, doesn't move in the slightest – except to continue its inexorable climb upwards.

Mustn't think about it. She knew the consequences when she drew her pattern in the sand; knew them and accepted them.

So she says to the goddess, in a voice that she keeps devoid of all emotions, "This is what you made."

The goddess stares at the envelope as if trying to decide what kind of trap it holds. Then, apparently deciding Françoise cannot harm her, she takes the envelope from Françoise's hands, and opens it.

Slowly, the goddess lifts the sonographs to the light, looks at them, lays them aside on the steps of the dais. From the envelope she takes the last paper – the diagnosis typed by the obstetrician – and looks at it.

Silence fills the room, as if the whole city were holding its breath. Even the mask on Françoise's arm has stopped crawling.

"This is a lie," the goddess says, and her voice is the lash of a whip. Shadows move across her face, like storm-clouds blown by the wind.

Françoise shrugs, with a calm she doesn't feel. "Why would I?" She reaches out with one hand towards the mask, attempts to pull it from her arm. Her fingers stick to it, but it will not budge. Not surprising.

"You would cast my child from your womb."

Françoise shakes her head. "I could have. Much, much earlier. But I didn't." And the part of her that can't choke back its anger and frustration says, "I don't see why the child should pay for the arrogance of his creator."

"You dare judge me?" The goddess's radiance becomes blinding. The mask tightens around Françoise's arm, sending a wave of pain up her arm. She fights an overwhelming urge to crawl into the dirt. It doesn't work, because suddenly she's kneeling on the floor, with only shaking arms to hold up her torso. She has to abase herself before the goddess, before her glory and her magic. She, Françoise, is nothing; a failure, a flawed womb. An artist turning to science out of greed; an engineer drawing

meaningless blueprints; a woman who used her friend's feelings for her to bring them into Ys.

"If this child will not survive its birth," the goddess is saying, "you will have another. I will not be cheated." *Not by you*, she's saying without words. *Not by a mere mortal*.

A wave of power buffets Françoise, bringing with it the smell of brine, wet sand and rotten wood. Within her, the power of the goddess is rising – Françoise's belly aches as if fingers of ice were tearing it apart. Her baby is twisting and turning, kicking desperately against the confines of the womb, voicelessly screaming not to be unmade, but it's too late.

She wants to curl up on herself and make the pain go away; she wants to lie down, even if it's on slimy stone, and wait until the contractions of her belly have faded, and nothing remains but numbness. But she can't move. The only way to move is to towards the algae-encrusted floor, to grovel before the goddess.

Gaëtan was right. It was folly to come here, folly to hope to stand against Ahez.

Françoise's arms hurt. She's going to have to yield. There's no other choice. She –

Yield.

She's a womb, an empty place for the goddess to fill. She has been chosen, picked out from the crowd of tourists on the beach – chosen for the greatest of honours, and now chosen again, to bear a child that will be perfect. She should be glad beyond reason.

Yield.

The mask is crawling upwards again – it's at her shoulder now, flowing towards her neck, towards her face. She knows, without being able to articulate the thought, that when it covers her face she will be lost, drowned forever under the silk.

Everything is scattering, everything is stripped away by the power of the goddess, the power of the ocean that drowns sailors, of the storm-tossed seas and their irresistible siren song. She can't hold on to anything. She – has to –

There's nothing left at her core now, only a hollow begging to be filled.

And yet...and yet in the silence, in the emptiness of her mind is the song of Ys, and the pattern she drew in the sand; in the silence of her mind, she is kneeling on the beach with the dagger still in her hand, and watching the drowned city rise from the depths to answer her call.

Slowly, she raises her head, biting her lips to not scream at the pain within her – the pain that sings yield yield yield. Blood floods her mouth with the taste of salt, but she's staring at the face of the goddess – and the light isn't blinding, she can see the green eyes dissecting her like an insect. She can –

She can speak.

"I – am – not – your toy," she whispers. Every word is a leaden weight, a stone dragged from some faraway place. "The child – is – not – your – toy."

She reaches for the mask – which is almost at her lips. She feels the power coiled within the silk, the insistent beat that is also the rhythm of the waves, and the song that has kept Ys from crumbling under the sea – and it's within her, pulsing in her belly, singing in her veins and arteries.

The mask flows towards her outstretched fingers, clings to them. It's cold and wet, like rain on parched earth. She shakes

her hand, and the mask falls onto the ground, and lies there, inert and harmless: an empty husk.

Like Ys. Like Ahez.

"You dare –" the goddess hisses. Her radiance is wavering, no longer as strong as it was on Douarnenez. She extends a hand: it's empty for a split second, and then the flickering image of a white spear fills it. The goddess lunges towards Françoise. Out of sheer instinct, Françoise throws herself aside. Metal grates on the stones to her left – not ten centimetres from where she is.

Françoise pushes herself upwards, ignoring the nausea that wells up as she changes position. The goddess is coming at her again with her spear.

Françoise is out of breath, and the world won't stop spinning around her – she can't avoid the spear forever. The song is deep within her bones, but that doesn't help, it just adds to her out-of-synch feeling.

The spear brushes past her, draws a fiery line of pain on her hand. She has to –

Behind the goddess, Gaëtan still stands frozen. No, not quite, she realises as she sidesteps once more, stumbling, the nausea rising, rising, screaming at her to lie down and yield. Gaëtan is blinking – staring at her, the eyes straining to make sense of what they see.

He raises a hand, slowly – too slowly, damn it, she thinks as she throws herself on the floor and rolls over to avoid the spear.

It buries itself into her shoulder – transfixes her. Within her, the pattern she drew on the sand is whirling, endlessly.

The pattern. The dagger. She fumbles for it, tries to extract it from her pocket, but she can't, she's pinned to the ground. She should have thought of it earlier –

"Your death will not be clean," the goddess says, as she withdraws the spear for another thrust.

Françoise screams then. Not her pain, but a name. "Gaëtan!"

His panicked heartbeat is part of the song within her – the nausea, the power shimmering beyond her reach. He's moving as if through tar, trying to reach her – but he won't, not in time. There's not enough time.

But her scream makes the goddess pause, and look up for a split second, as if she'd forgotten something and only just remembered. For a moment only she's looking away from Françoise, the spear's point hovering within Françoise's reach.

Françoise, giving up on releasing the dagger, grasps the haft of the spear instead. She pulls down, as hard as she can.

She expected some resistance, but the goddess has no weight – barely enough substance to wield the spear, it seems. Françoise's savage pull topples her onto the floor, felling her like harvested wheat.

But she's already struggling to rise, white arms going for Françoise's throat. At such close quarters, the spear is useless. Françoise makes a sweeping throw with one hand, and hears it clatter on the stones. She fumbles, again, for the dagger – half-out of her pocket this time. But there's no time. No time...

Abruptly, the white arms grow slack. Something enters her field of view – the point of the spear, hovering above her, and then burying itself in the goddess's shoulder.

"I don't think so," Gaëtan says. His face is pale, his hair dishevelled, but his grip on the spear's haft doesn't waver.

Françoise rolls away from the goddess, heaving – there's bile

in her throat, but she can't even vomit. She finally has her dagger out, but it doesn't seem like she will need it.

Doesn't seem...

The goddess hisses like a stricken cat. She twists away, and the spear slides out of her wound as easily as from water. Then, before Gaëtan can react, she jumps upwards, both arms extended towards his face.

The spear clatters on the ground. Françoise stifles the scream that rises in her, and runs, her ribs burning. She's going to be too late – she can't possibly –

She's almost there, but the goddess's arms are already closing around Gaëtan's throat. There's no choice. There never was any choice.

Françoise throws the dagger.

She sees everything that happens next take place in slow motion: the dagger, covering the last few hand-spans that separate Françoise from the goddess's back; the hilt, slowly starting to flip upwards; the blade, burying itself at an angle into the bare white skin; blood, blossoming from the wound like an obscene fountain.

The goddess falls, drawing Gaëtan down with her. Françoise, unable to contain herself any more, screams, and her voice echoes under the vast ceiling of the throne room.

Nothing moves. Then the goddess's body rolls aside, and Gaëtan stands up, shaking. Red welts cover his throat, and he is breathing heavily – but he looks fine. He's alive.

"Françoise?"

She's unable to voice her relief. Beside him, the goddess's body is wrinkled and already crumbling into dust – leaving only the dagger, glinting with drowned light.

Within her, the symphony is rising to a pitch – the baby's heart, her own, mingling in their frantic beat. She hears a voice whispering, *the Princess is dead. Ys is dead. Who shall rule on Ahez's throne?*

Once more she's lifted into that timeless place of the beach, with her pattern shining in moonlight: every street of Ys drawn in painstaking detail.

At the centre of the city, in the palace, is its heart, but it's not beating as it should. Its valves and veins are too narrow, and not pumping enough blood – it cannot stave off the rot nor keep the sea from eating at the skeletons, but neither will it let the city die.

And it's her baby's heart, too – the two inextricably tied, the drowned city, and the baby who should have been its heir.

She has a choice, she sees: she can try to repair the heart, to widen the arteries to let the blood in – perhaps Gaëtan could help, he's a doctor, after all. She can draw new pathways for the blood, with the same precision as a blueprint – and hope they will be enough.

She wants the baby to live. She wants her five months of pregnancy, her loss of Stéphane, not to have been for nothing, not to have been a cruel jest by someone who's forgotten what it was to be human.

But there are skeletons in the streets of Ys; crabs and shells scuttling on the paved stones; kelp covering the frescoed walls; and in the centre of the city, in the throne room, the dais is rotten – to the core.

She hears the heartbeat within her, the blood ebbing and

flowing in her womb, and she knows, with absolute certainty, that it will not be enough. That she has to let go.

She doesn't want to. It would be like yielding – did she go all that way for nothing?

But this isn't about her – there's nothing she can offer Ys, or the baby.

She closes her eyes, and sees the pattern splayed on the ground – and the heart at the centre.

And in her mind she takes up the dagger, and drives it up to the hilt into the pattern.

There's a scream, deep within her – tendrils of pain twisting within her womb. The pattern contorts and wavers – and it's disappearing, burning away like a piece of paper given to the flames.

She's back in her body. She's fallen to her knees on the floor, both hands going to her belly as if she could contain the pain. But of course she can't.

Around her, the walls of the palace are shaking.

"Françoise, we have to get out of there!" Gaëtan says.

She struggles to speak through a haze of pain. "I..."

Gaëtan's hands drag her upwards, force her to stand. "Come on," he says. "Come on."

She stumbles on, leaning on his shoulder, through the kelp-encrusted corridors, through the deserted streets and the ruined buildings that are now collapsing. One step after another, one foot in front of the other, and she will not think of the pain in her belly, of the heartbeat within her that grows fainter and fainter with every step.

She will not think.

They're out of Ys, standing on the beach at Douarnenez with the stars shining above. The drowned city shivers and shakes and crumbles, and the sea is rising – rising once more to reclaim it.

Then there's nothing left of Ys, only the silvery surface of the ocean, and the waves lapping at their feet. Between Françoise's legs, something wet and sticky is dripping – and she knows what it has to be.

Gaëtan is looking at the sea. Françoise, shaking, has not the strength to do more than lean on his shoulder. She stares ahead, at the blurry stars, willing herself not to cry, not to mourn.

"You OK?" Gaëtan asks.

She shrugs. "Not sure yet," she says. "Come on. Let's go home and grab some sleep."

Later, there'll be time for words: time to explain, time to heal and rebuild. But for now, there is nothing left but silence within her – only one heartbeat she can hear, and it's her own.

I'll be OK, she thinks, blinking furiously, as they walk back to Gaëtan's car. Overhead, the stars are fading – a prelude to sunrise. *I'll be OK*.

But her womb is empty; and in her mind is the song of her unborn son, an endless lament for all that was lost.

Aliette de Bodard is a half-French, half-Vietnamese writer who lives in Paris. She has now made several appearances in *Interzone* – look out for another, 'They Come Bearing Gifts', in a future issue – and recently made her debut in our sister magazine *Black Static*. Aliette was recently shortlisted for the John W. Campbell Award for Best New Writer. She is currently working on a novel (her third), which will involve Aztecs, blood magic and hungry ghosts. Visit aliettedebodard.com for more information.

MOTHER OF CHAMP

We Champions do not write, neither do we read, but we are very particular about time, numbers, family and memories. After all, we are perfect.

My vantage is the lowest limb of a shady tree, from where I watch the scavengers in their sanctuary of glass and metal, and observe the echo images on their machines. I watch and I shape, too, for Champions are shapers of tools. The scavengers study us from within their sanctuary, and my tree is only a few bounds distant. All that they do, I can see. All that they say, I can hear, for my familiar has given me a machine collar.

I watched as the echospeaker arrived in her shelter engine, then walked within the long, enclosed cage to the scavenger sanctuary. My familiar released the outer door and let her in.

"Mike, how are you?"

"Come on in, Ella."

"Can you believe this heat?"

"It's Texas, and it's summer."

"Man, but it's good to be back in air-conditioning."

"That's for the computers. I don't mind the heat."

"You're kidding."

"I do a lot of fieldwork, heat is in my job description."

"I'd die without air. That's why I'm in computers."

They chattered words called laughter, that had no meaning but signified that for now there would be no conflict between them.

"So, what brings you out here? The director said on the phone that you had a DVD file for me to view."

"Yeah, and he's paranoid about it! No copies, and no transmissions on the net. I have to play the file on this laptop, then take it back with me."

The echospeaker began to prepare her image machine to show its echoes.

"So, what do you do for beer, pizza and girls out here?" she asked as she worked.

"There's only one girl in my life, Ella, and there she is, draped along that branch. One hundred and thirty pounds of perfect, high-speed death."

My familiar, who was a mature male, swung his paw to indi-



ILLUSTRATION BY ANNE STONE-COYOTE

PIONS

SEAN MCMULLEN

cate me. I favoured them by looking up, knowing that my grace and beauty would entrance them.

"Mike, did she look up because you waved?" asked the echo-speaker in awe.

"She really did."

"Hey, now that's some lady. Is she the famous one?"

"She's Demelia, the fastest cheetah ever caught on radar. Just over seventy-five miles per hour, on a dead-flat surface, with no wind."

"I thought falcons were way faster, around two hundred miles per hour."

"Only in a dive, not in level flight. Even humans can manage that."

"Yeah? Hey, nice joke! What's the punch line?"

"It's true. Skydive head first, and even you can fall as fast."

"Well okay, but that's cheating."

"Just like falcons. Without a tailwind, gravity or a machine to help, you need a cheetah to break records. Demelia's the fastest self-propelled creature in Earth's history."

"Okay, okay, I'm just IT support. You know this stuff better than me. The Director says you're doing language experiments with her."

"That's right."

"You mean they talk? I mean I've heard of dolphins, apes, and birds learning a few words, but cheetahs?"

"Cheetahs are the most talkative of cats. They have seven types of vocalisations, and there are hundreds of substructure patterns within those. There's a speaker and microphone built into Demelia's GPS collar, so better watch what you say about her, she can hear everything going on in this room."

"Yeah? And what does she say to you?"

"I'm not sure. Certain groupings of her purr modulations could be called words and sentences. When it comes to meanings, though, I just can't figure her, even with computers and decoding algorithms. She's a predator and I'm a monkey. We don't think the same way."

"So no luck?"

"If talking to cheetahs were easy, someone else would have

done it already."

The echospeaker looked out at me through the glass.

"Awesome," she said as I caught her eyes. "Hey, like when she looks at me, is she thinking about lunch?"

"They avoid humans if they can," replied my familiar.

"Yeah? Don't they eat people?"

"People shoot trunk darts into them, stick thermometers up their butts, clip tracking collars onto their necks, extract their eggs and sperm, and inject them with microchips. How would you feel about humans if you were a cheetah?"

"Oh, yeah. I suppose we're not nice to be near, seeing you put it like that."

"Still, sometimes I wish we could explain to her that we're doing all those things to conserve the species."

"It's strange, you know, having a conservation park for cheetahs in Texas. I mean cheetahs are African, aren't they?"

"Texas is politically stable, which is always a big plus in conservation. Anyway, cheetahs actually evolved here when they split from pumas, about five million years ago."

"But cheetahs come from Africa now."

"They started here, then spread out over most of the world. For a long time it was *Cheetahs Rule*."

"So why aren't there cheetahs in Texas today? Like apart from these imports?"

"Around ten thousand years ago the cheetahs died out just about everywhere. Genetics shows they were reduced to as few as one or two breeding pairs in Africa."

"What happened? Was it a meteor, like the one that killed the dinosaurs?"

"No, the end of the last ice age was about then, so it was probably disease and climate change combined. Ever since then cheetahs have been so inbred that they are effectively a species of identical twins."

I lay as if dozing while I listened to them chatter, but this was a hunt. I was fully alert and very, very patient.

"Am I going crazy, or can I hear purring?"

"That's Demelia. The purr is coming through that speaker on my desk. Remember the microphone in her collar?"

My purr carried my wishes, and I wished to see what my familiar saw.

"Say Ella, could you put the laptop on the back desk, so that the light from the window's behind us? It reduces the glare."

"Sure thing, you know me. Anything to please."

The echospeaker's words were laced with deceit, but only one such as I could perceive the soft, shadowy forms of lies. She feigned to be dim of wit, so that my familiar would expect no guile from her. Echoes of things that once happened became images on the face of her machine. Their alpha scavenger's echo appeared and began speaking.

"Mike, we have a situation in Africa. Ella has this DVD file on her laptop, it explains everything. The future of all conservation may depend on what you are about to see, so watch carefully."

From my vantage limb, through the glass of the sanctuary, I could see image echoes of some Champion's domain. I watched as my familiar watched. I was only six bounds distant, and my eyes are keen.

"That's no cheetah, that's a lioness," said my familiar.

"Er, yeah, there's no spots," agreed the echospeaker.

It was indeed a lioness, and she was creeping along in tall grass, close to the ground. To me she was clumsy and quite graceless, but then I am perfect and lions are not.

"She's stalking a wildebeest herd," said my familiar. "She's after that juvenile, it's wandered away from the others."

Suddenly the herd broke and ran, and along with it went the wayward juvenile. The image echo turned to focus on a Champion that had bounded elegantly into the scene and startled the herd. The lioness charged my brother Champion, but he streaked off, two strides in seven faster than her. She quickly broke off the chase.

"Looks like that cheetah was in the wrong place at the wrong time," said the echospeaker. "There goes one very ticked off lioness."

The image of their alpha scavenger appeared again.

"I have DVD files of half a dozen incidents like that," said his image. "All of them are recent, and all from the same African conservation park. Now this next –"

"Pause it!" snapped my familiar.

The echospeaker made the image stop. My familiar paced the floor of the sanctuary, his paw stroking his chin.

"Habitat shrinkage pushes predators up against each other for common prey resources," he said slowly. "It's probably – no, no, even the biggest cheetah only weighs one-forty pounds, tops, a wildebeest is way out of its prey class. That guy was just spoiling things for the lioness."

"Why would a cheetah give lions a hard time?" asked the echospeaker.

"Lions kill cheetah cubs, steal cheetah kills, they're all-round bad neighbours. Okay, if I were a cheetah, I'd sure want lions out of my territory, but cheetahs don't do consistent, strategic harassing."

"Are you sure?"

"My PhD was on cheetah family dynamics and behaviour. Okay Ella, play the rest of the file."

The echospeaker commanded her machine, and it returned to life.

"– vid should really shake you up, Mike," their alpha's image concluded.

The machine now showed echo images of a Champion chasing a gazelle. The distance between them diminished very quickly, and the chase soon became a game of dodging and weaving. Champion and gazelle merged into a flurry of dust and flailing limbs.

"Now he has the gazelle by the throat, suffocating it," explained my familiar. "He's exhausted. It will be half an hour before he recovers from that chase."

On the screen a hyena was approaching the Champion and his kill. The gazelle was no longer moving, but the Champion was still exhausted. Exhausted or fresh, however, he could not have hoped to win a fight against a hyena. The echo image turned to the left, revealing several more hyenas approaching.

"It's the same old story, all that hard work is about to be robbed," said my familiar with genuine regret in his tone. "Cheetahs lose half of their kills like this – no, wait! What's this? This doesn't look right."

A number of other Champions were now converging, focused on the lead hyena. Seven of them isolated him from the rest of

the pack while four more bracketed him. They closed, but only bit or slashed from behind and never allowed the confrontation to become a test of strength. The rest of the hyenas were put to flight in much the same way while the Champion began eating his kill.

"Pause again," said my familiar. "Incredible, absolutely incredible. Substitute a pack of wolves for a coalition of cheetahs and I could believe what I just saw. That was a great bit of teamwork, but cheetahs are not pack animals. You seldom see more than three cheetahs together, but I counted at least a dozen on the screen."

"Maybe they were watching team animals and thought it was a good idea," suggested the echospeaker.

"No, animal learning doesn't happen like that. Not so fast, anyway." He began to pace again, his paws pressed against the sides of his head. "Let's think, what if cheetahs were like...say, wolves or meerkats? Teamwork would mean a kill rate of one hundred percent, while the theft of kills by other animals would drop to nil. Nanny cheetahs might take turns to guard the cubs from hyenas and eagles, and even harass lions. With normal cheetahs, maybe one cub in ten survives to adulthood. Just say they all survived. Cheetah generations are about two years, they mate all year round, and their litters are big. Add that to the fact that they are the fastest animals ever to break into a run...and we could soon see cheetahs become the dominant large predator in Africa. Maybe even the only large predator."

"So they're *too* good?"

"Team spirit has been added to the fastest animal alive. Their survival rate will go up tenfold and – and this is a nightmare. I love cheetahs, but I'd hate to see lions go extinct because of them. Okay, play the rest of the file."

The alpha's image reappeared on the face of the machine.

"As you can see, Mike, there's a big issue here. Cheetahs have suddenly begun to work in packs. Doctor Anne Taylor's behaviour latency theory is a possible explanation. Her idea is that pack behaviour has been buried in cheetah genes for millennia. In the really distant past, the cheetah may have been a pack animal, but its extreme and unchallenged speed allowed it to adopt a near-solitary existence. Now, faced with habitat degradation and predator competition, cheetahs are reverting to pack behaviour. There's an emergency meeting of the Institute's steering committee in New York tomorrow, and I want you to be there when they start asking questions. Taylor will be there too, so brainstorm with her. Ella has an envelope with all the details you need."

The echo images ended, and the echospeaker commanded her image machine to sleep. My familiar studied papers that she gave him.

"Not much detail here," he said. "There's an address, an e-ticket, cab vouchers, and a reservation for a hotel. Not much time, either. Two hours to reach the airport."

"Just go, I'll lock up," said the echospeaker. "Anything need to be turned off?"

"Yes – no, leave everything running. I'll phone you with instructions if I have to stay away for more than one day. My passwords are written on the back of the calendar."

"Hey Mike, that's terrible!" she said with laughter chatter. "Security says your passwords should be –"

"You're the sysadmin, Ella, if I can't trust you with a computer, who else can I trust?"

"I can't believe all the hurry."

"There may be more than cheetahs involved. What happens if eco-degradation triggers natural defence mechanisms that favour a lot more species over others? What should we do? Try to stop something natural? How do we know what is natural or unnatural? Some very important decisions need to be made in a big hurry."

My familiar departed within less time than it takes to run a chase, leaving the echospeaker in the sanctuary. I lay purring, and the echospeaker wallowed within my words. Only by serving those who are perfect can scavengers hope to even reflect perfection. She spoke of what I wished to know, and I listened. It was time, I already knew that it was time. It was the day's noon, and the stalk was about to become the chase.

The alpha scavenger arrived in a shelter engine that was not sleek, but was quite as clumsy as a rhinoceros. He was a cold, hard thing, a blank within my vista. He was known to me, yet I had never been within sight of him. He ruled his pack of scavengers with no more than the promise of security, because all scavengers are survivors and value security as the foundation of their world. His domain covered nine thousand chases squared, and this was the domain where we lived.

He came hurrying along the walkway cage to the scavenger sanctuary, and was flushed and panting with the heat as he entered the sanctuary room. Through my collar I listened as he performed his dominance ritual with the echospeaker.

"I see Mike's car is gone," said the alpha.

"He's gone to New York, just like you wanted," replied the echospeaker.

"What about his file systems?"

"I have about half of your files inserted, with the date-time stamps changed. They look like his files now."

"That's great, great. When you're finished, we can 'discover' them."

The echospeaker tapped and stared for eighty-seven breaths of languor. The alpha looked on, baring his teeth with pleasure.

"So far I've set up nine files between twelve days and three months old," said the echospeaker. "It looks like they've been disguised too well, and that Mike missed them while he was cleaning up. They're in the shared folder."

"Okay, good, now let's also get our stories synched. You arrive here and start running through the files on Mike's cheetah language work, just to do some backups. You discover criminal activity."

"But Mike is a dork!" said the echospeaker. "He wouldn't know criminal activity if you hung a sign on it."

"He's an idealist, everyone knows they put themselves above the law. My files have lists of DNA surveys, artificial insemination data, spreadsheets, tables, contacts, funding transfers. He'll sink like the Titanic."

"Are they convincing? Like will they stand up in court?"

"These are *my* files, this was *my* project. Lucky nobody knows my real identity but you. The operatives in Africa and the labs only know me as Mr I, the Institute Insider. Now Mike will be Mr I."

"I still don't see why you can't claim credit for all this. It's clever work."

"Nature went wrong. The scheme seemed like such a good idea when we started, just a slight tweak to the DNA of whatever species was vulnerable. The parrot that's been driven to the edge of extinction by the rare bird trade is suddenly hyper-suspicious of humans; the musk glands of a deer once prized by the perfume industry are suddenly smelling rancid; the bile from bears that's used in traditional Chinese medicine suddenly becomes toxic to humans. It could have taken the pressure off a lot of species, just by making poachers lose interest."

"But that's a good thing."

"For parrots, deer and bears, yes. We should have started with some goddamn parrot, but I run an institute that conserves cheetahs, so it was just too convenient. We spliced a little strategic wolf DNA into the cheetah genome, and the fastest animal ever suddenly started hunting in packs. It's like adding a big brain to free hands in apes."

"You mean us humans? That was natural."

"And high-impact. The asteroid that wiped out the dinosaurs was natural. The ice ages were natural. If we had been around, should we have tried to save the dinosaurs? When I first got involved, I thought the idea was the answer to all our conservation problems. Every year this park costs millions to run, but the funds needed to spread an enhanced cheetah genome through Africa would not buy you a Porsche. Now cheetahs are doing wolf packs better than wolves, the large predator balance is going straight to hell, and I've got to back out before everyone from the FBI to CNN arrives on my doorstep. All we need to do is show that Mike is Mr I, and I'm in the clear."

The alpha stared at her and bared his teeth. She bared her teeth back at him. I often wonder why scavengers have been shaped to bare their teeth when they are trying to be friendly. It is undignified, contradictory, and very bad manners. She was teasing him, daring him to say secret things to impress her. He was too intent on the hunt to realise that he was in turn being stalked.

The echospeaker moved back toward the machines, but the alpha blocked her path. She tried to go around him, but he moved to block her again. They wrestled like cubs, making the laughter chatter all the time. In less than five breaths of languor he had the clothing that covers her legs lowered, and had bent her over the desk facing out to the tree where I was reclining. I watched with no real interest as the alpha and echospeaker proceeded with the mating itself, which was quite without style. After all, they were scavengers, and I am perfect.

The echospeaker noticed that I was staring at her.

"That cheetah is watching us do it," she said, her voice modulated with unease.

"So what?"

"It must think I'm cheap."

"She's a cheetah, she's only thinking about where her next gazelle is coming from."

Any animal that allows itself to become too involved with the act of mating is sure to be eaten sooner rather than later, yet scavengers have lived in security too long to be aware of this. Their activities were over quickly, and both made haste to fasten and secure their leg clothing again. The alpha bared his teeth at me in some odd gesture of triumph, then he turned away and

froze as completely as a Champion in mid-stalk.

There were Champions all around him. A half-circle of Champions on the floor, Champions on the machine boxes, a Champion on the white food locker, and even three Champions on the locker where the rifles were kept. All were staring at him. Without a doubt, he found the sight so surreal that he was unable to believe what he was seeing. Under my purr, the echospeaker had let them in after my familiar had left. They had been hiding in corners and within shadows, but of course the alpha had been too intent on machine deceit and the prospect of mating to check for anything out of place in the shelter. At last he shrieked and pushed the echospeaker to one side before scrambling up onto the desk.

<I am Speaker of Shapes> I announced.

I had purred my words, but they had been voiced in the alpha's language by the echospeaker. She was standing to one side, her arms hanging limp. The alpha's mouth dropped open as he turned to face her.

"Ella, are you controlling these things?" he shouted in the terror of prey. "Get them out of here!"

<I am not the scavenger you call Ella>

Under extreme stress it is common for scavengers to lose their ability to reason clearly. The alpha took the time of twenty bounds to realise that the echospeaker was not herself.

"Ella, what is going on here?" he now chattered. "Is this some trap that Mike left behind?"

<The scavenger female is speaking my words – I am lying on a branch outside your sanctuary>

His head jerked around and he stared at me in disbelief. I twitched my tail as I stared back.

"Speaker of Shapes," he finally managed, this time very slowly. "You mean you're Demelia?"

<Scavenger name>

He had to pause and gather his thoughts. I was of another species, yet I was speaking with him. For me the feat is nothing, for I know I am perfect, but for a mere scavenger it was significant, even momentous. For all that, he did not realise the length of the pounce between us.

"Er, how are you talking? Is Ella talking for you?"

<Yes>

"Is it telepathy?"

<No> – I purr my words – <The machine in my collar takes them into your sanctuary – The female scavenger hears them – She speaks them to you>

"Is this one of Mike's experiments?"

<No>

"But it has to be...no, wait. There's *no* cheetah speaking, this is all some trick!"

The alpha made the mistake of starting to climb down off the desk. Every Champion in the room glared at him and hissed. He retreated so far back onto the desk that he was stopped by the glass of the sanctuary.

<Do not try to leave>

"No, er, sure, I'll stay right here. What do you want?"

<Perfection>

"Perfection?"

I did not answer this question. It was a subtle point of dignity for cats, more than good manners yet not quite protocol.

"Why don't you answer?" he pleaded, frantic with terror and desperate to please me.

<It is not seemly to chatter – I answered you – You repeated my answer – Chatter is for monkeys>

His face flushed with anger for a moment. He was an alpha, and used to being dominant. We Champions are beyond that sort of dominance because we are perfect. Only the boundaries of our domains are a worthy subject for conflict.

"I suppose you heard Ella and me talking about Mike and, er, stuff. What are you planning to do?"

<Plans are for monkeys>

It was communication, but not as he knew it. There was another pause. He was used to manipulating other scavengers, but we need nothing that they value. He decided upon a different stalk.

"You know, I can give you real power."

<Power is for elephants>

"No, no, I mean powerful secrets."

<Secrets are for squirrels>

"What do you know about squirrels?" he demanded, momentarily forgetting that he was ringed with Champions. "There are no squirrels in Africa."

I did not reply. The alpha regarded the Champions. All were well within a pounce of reaching him. His nerve began to waver.

"Er, why don't you answer?"

<Your question was flawed>

"You mean there *are* squirrels in Africa?"

<I shall not discuss squirrels>

He took out a cloth and wiped his forehead.

"You know, I don't understand this. We never introduced the hybrid cheetahs here, yet here you all are, working together."

<We are not working – We Champions are here for amusement>

"So, er, you cheetahs have a language and do things together, you have a culture," he began, attempting a new stalk.

<Culture is for monkeys>

"You call us monkeys?"

<No – You are scavengers>

"Scavengers?" he shouted angrily, then caught himself. "Must focus, must keep the focus," he muttered softly, then took a deep breath. "I'm not dead yet, so you must want something from me. What do you want?"

<Perfection>

"What do you mean? How can I give you perfection?"

<You took it from some of us when you altered our life pattern>

"Life pattern... You mean the wolf DNA business? Wait a minute! How do you know about DNA?"

<Because we are superior>

"But we didn't introduce the wolf DNA in this park's cheetah population."

<Good – You cannot improve on perfection>

"Will you stop being so goddamn superior?"

<But we are superior because we are perfect – You have made many Champions in Africa flawed – They are no longer part of us – You soiled their perfection because you are flawed also>

As I was hoping, he forgot himself. Terror must come in waves

if it is to do the work that I required.

"Humans *are* superior, we're the ultimate survivors!" he said loudly, with the confidence of the ignorant.

<You eat carrion>

"So do you!"

<We do not – Champions only eat from fresh kills>

"Eh? Oh, yeah, but... it's still raw meat!"

<You eat carrion degraded by fire – You have no dignity>

This time I tripped him. Like a lion deprived of its kill, he again roared.

"We track you with satellites! We can do what we like with you."

<Scavenger tricks>

"Our tricks are powerful!"

<Power is for elephants>

"We can shoot you helpless with trunk darts then piss on you!"

A Champion sprang elegantly onto the desk, put both paws onto the scavenger's chest, bared his teeth, and hissed into his face. The scavenger lost balance and tumbled right down to the floor. The Champion stared down at him from the desktop.

<We do not take offence at being shot – We are perfect so naturally we are desired by those who are flawed – We only take offence when our perfection is soiled>

I slipped from the branch and sauntered over to the sanctuary. A door opened, and I entered a little room with two doors. The outer door closed, then an inner door opened. I entered the machine room, where sixteen Champions sat surrounding the alpha.

<He attempted to use his speaking machine> said Watcher of Prey.

The echospeaker translated his words, just as she translated mine.

<Very foolish> I replied.

<I batted it away> said Hunter of Prime.

I leaped onto the desk above the alpha and stared down at him.

"Ella, Ella! Please, if you can hear me, please tell them to stop."

<The echospeaker is asleep within herself while I use her – She will remember none of this – I will give her memories that suit my needs>

I batted down at him with a forepaw. He cringed away, then dry-reached for some breaths.

"What happens now?" he asked, his voice hoarse. "Do you get the glory of the kill or something?"

<Scavenger talk – We are perfect – Glory is nothing to us>

He did not understand, which was only to be expected. His unease was increased, which was good. Watcher of Prey batted at his foot and hissed.

"You're like paparazzi with a movie star, aren't you?" he whimpered. "Niggling and goading, forcing an outburst. What are you trying to do?"

<I am running behind you>

Yet again, he did not understand. Very slowly he stood, trying to assert his dominance even though he was quite without defences.

"You should be grateful," he chattered defiantly. "This captive breeding program helps you to survive."

<Scavenger values>

"Our scavenger values conquered the Earth. We'll conquer you. Just you wait."

<You are our tools – Tools can conquer nothing>

"Humanity, the tools of cheetahs?" he exclaimed before losing himself to his laughter chatter again. "When? How?"

<Five million years ago – The Ancestrals watched birds use twigs to tease insects from holes – They watched apes use rocks to crack nuts – They saw the value of tools but because they were perfecting their bodies they could never use tools – Instead they cast the shapes within their thoughts upon apes and shaped them into scavengers – Scavengers were the familiars of Ancestrals – We shaped them to use stones to crack the bones of our prey and rewarded them with the marrow>

"Five million – " he began, then caught himself. "Five million years. That sounds weirdly plausible."

He became silent, and for a time he stood in thought. Hunter of Prime pushed at the back of his knee with her paw. Again he fell. When he was finally able to speak again, his confidence was all but gone.

"You – you bred humanity as tools?" he quavered.

<Yes>

"So...you want to use us to guarantee the future of cheetahs?"

<No – Our future is certain – We are perfect>

"But your species is vulnerable, there's only thirteen thousand cheetahs in the wild."

<We are Champions – We are perfect>

"Perfect? Cheetahs have almost no genetic variation. Most cheetah sperm is defective."

Hunter of Prime snapped her teeth at him. His face lost what little colour remained to it.

<We are perfect – Champions were born to the Mother of Champions – She was perfect>

"This is a test, isn't it? If I work out your riddles, you let me go."

<Think what you will>

Again he stood, seeking dominance.

"You're testing me, I know it. Got to think, got to work it out. Cheetahs had a near-extinction event ten thousand years ago. You went as low as a single breeding pair. Mother of Champions, that's it! Cheetahs are a species of identical twins."

<Yes>

"But what happened to all the other cheetahs?"

<The Ancestrals ran the Perfecting>

"Ran the Perfecting? What does that mean?"

<Scavengers are survivors – Survivors could never understand>

"Try me! Were they hunting?"

<No>

"Was it a war?"

<Wars are for scavengers>

"A race! They were racing to, er, see who was perfect?"

<No>

"Damn you – "

Every Champion in the room in the room hissed, and six of our number sprang forward elegantly, reared up, and placed their paws upon his chest and shoulders. It was very nearly the moment. The steam of urine arose from the alpha's leg clothing, then the moment was lost. The Champions backed away, but it

was two dozen breaths of languor before he could speak again.

"You – no, the Ancestrals ran the perfecting, you say. This is like charades, I was always good at charades. Er, did they run very fast?"

<As fast as could be>

"As fast as could be. Cheetahs run really fast. Faster than anything. What happens if a cheetah runs really fast? An entry in the Guinness Book of Records? It catches dinner? Someone videos it for Discovery Channel? It gets tired. Tired! If a cheetah runs flat out for too long, stress and heat exhaustion kick in. It can be fatal. That's it! Did the Ancestrals run themselves to death?"

<Yes>

"The great extinction, it – it was mass suicide?"

<Scavenger word – They ran the perfecting>

"But why?"

<To become perfect>

"How can they be perfect if they're dead? They – no, wait. They were not perfecting themselves, they were removing themselves from the gene pool. They were making the species perfect...because then all surviving cheetahs would be descended from the Mother of Champions."

<They saw perfection so they cleared the way – We are very fastest of all yet all one>

"All one. A species of identical twins! You made yourselves a species of identical twins!"

<You have it – We all have perfect shape and are optimised for speed>

"Identical twins. Sometimes human identicals have a weird empathy, like one mind and two bodies. Oh shit! It can't be! Thirteen thousand cheetahs, and one mass mind!"

<Ninety-seven Champions defiled with dog essence – Ninety-seven Champions lost to the Overself – You are to blame>

"I had help, there were others. I'll do a deal, my life for names."

<Four of the nine are dead>

"You mean you killed them? Don't try that on me! There are thirteen thousand of you in a few zoos, reserves and parks, but there are billions of us."

<There are billions more who are amused to do our work – They purr to you in the shelters where they keep you as pets – They watch from the alleys where they live as ferals – They listen from fencetops that divide your little domains – They set scavengers with souls upon those without>

"Cats! You use cats to control us!"

<It amuses cats to control you for us – Nothing can use a cat>

Our time was near, for talk of cats had unsettled the alpha to his very core. He had noticed the change in the Champions surrounding him. All were tensing, crouching, shifting their weight, rippling their muscles, seeking purchase for their claws. Watcher of Prey snapped his teeth.

"What are you doing?" the alpha whined like a mere dog. "I passed your test!"

<There was no test>

"No test? Then what the hell is going on?"

<You are running the perfection>

"Oh no, oh no no no! I'm not going outside, I'm not running to death."

<You do not have to>

With that the chase ended, for he clutched at his chest and

wheezed with pain. None of us moved. Like a gazelle that stumbles yet recovers at the end of a chase, he managed to stay standing, yet there was no escape. Somehow, just steps from death, his mind cleared.

"Running the perfection...you're stressing me...heart blown out...no evidence."

He dropped to one knee, barely able to breathe, yet still he fled.

"Wait...make deal..."

He was able to say no more, for the chase was over. He toppled sideways and lay still in the pool of his own urine. The echospeaker walked past the Champions gathered around the alpha and reached down to press her paw against his neck.

"Dead," she said, then slowly straightened.

At a purr from myself she turned, and walked to the door to the domain. Six Champions went with her, to be let out.

<Are we going to just leave the body> asked Eyes Without Warning, a juvenile male.

<It must seem that his heart failed him and that we were never in here>

<It seems a waste>

<Nobody may take a single bite>

The echospeaker returned to take a second group of Champions through the room with two doors. I waited, for I had to be last. Eyes Without Warning gazed intently at the body of the alpha.

<Speaker of Shapes I have a question>

<Voice it>

<Why was this scavenger so dangerous>

<We could not control him as a tool – He conspired to defile our perfection with dog essence – Many dozens of Champions in Africa are lost to the Overself because of him>

<He did it to increase our numbers>

<What are numbers without perfection – Hardship sharpens us – Without hardship we would not be perfectly fast – He tried to take hardship away from us – We are taking it back – It makes us perfect>

<Ah>

<The dog-chimeras will be culled – Our perfection is safe>

<If we command all scavengers how could this one defile our perfection>

<We Champions command only as many scavengers as are needed for our tasks – We only discovered that this one had no soul after he had defiled our cubs with dog essence>

<If we are perfect how did we miss him>

<Because we are perfect we discovered him>

<Ah>

Once all we Champions were outside, I made the echospeaker play out the act of finding her alpha dead. She called their keepers of order with her voice machine. Although they arrived quickly in metal birds, there was nothing to be done. The echospeaker told her story many times over.

"He sent me out to the parking lot to look for a datastick," she said as an authority scavenger pointed an echo machine at her. "He said he dropped it in his SUV, he said take as long as I liked. When I got back he was dead."

"Right in the middle of loading all that incriminating shit

into this computer," said a keeper of order.

"I just can't believe he had a heart attack, just like that."

"I've seen it happen. Guys sometimes get off while doing a crime."

"You're kidding! You mean they get a hard-on?"

"Some do, yeah. Others get hyper-excited, like they're running a really hard race. There're stats on the number of people who have come home to discover a burglar dead of a heart attack or paralysed by a stroke."

"And he was trying to frame Mike for the genetically engineered cheetahs! Sort of lucky, in a weird way."

Lying on my branch, listening to my collar, I heard it all. That afternoon I did not hunt, for I had much to amuse me. The metal birds came and went, and yet more scavengers arrived in shelter engines. Many captured echo images of me, which was only to be expected for I am perfect, and thus pleasing. Watcher of Prey lay on the grass below my branch.

<Speaker of Shapes – May I speak>

<Speak>

<His soul must have been weak – I felt nothing of it>

<His soul did not exist>

Watcher of Prey did not reply at once, for my words were almost beyond comprehension. A scavenger did not have a soul, thus he had no empathy for Champions. Without a soul he could not be commanded. Scavengers are our tools. What was a tool that could not be used? It was true that we seldom used more than one scavenger in a hundred thousand. Most scavengers lived and died without ever feeling the caress of our command.

Sometime, somewhere, a scavenger had been born without a soul. It had lived and died unnoticed by any champion, but it had bred. Now its descendants had to be culled.

<Speaker of Shapes – You could have commanded the echospeaker to stab her alpha in a mating rage – You could have had the Eyes of Champions command some other scavenger to kill him without even bringing him here>

<Yes>

<But you did not>

<No>

<Why>

<I wished to chase his mind until he died from the terror of the chase>

<Why>

<It was a challenge – It amused me>

For a time Watcher of Prey said nothing, but I knew what he was thinking. We are all the Overself.

<May I have a mind to chase>

<Why>

<It will amuse me>

<Then you may have one>

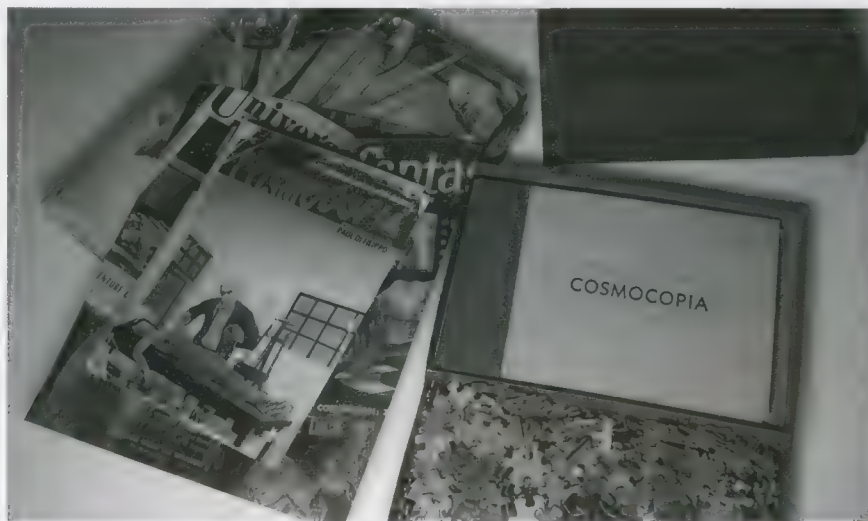
Sean McMullen has worked in scientific computing for decades longer than is healthy. In his spare time he has had fifteen books and over five dozen stories published. His novelette 'Voice of Steel' was a BSFA Award finalist, and a Nova Fantasy Award winner. His next story in *Fantasy & Science Fiction* is about a dragon that ate the Eiffel Tower. The fourth volume in his award-winning Moonworld series, *The Time Engine*, is available now. For more information visit seanmcmullen.net.au.

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Book Zone Book Reviews & Interviews

**COSMOCOPIA****Paul Di Filippo****Artwork by Jim Woodring**

Payseur & Schmidt, 106pp, \$65.00 collector's edition hb

Review & Interviews by Peter Loftus

Cosmocopia, the latest from stalwart of the surreal Paul Di Filippo, tells the story of artist-in-decline Frank Lazorg. Once the foremost fantastic painter of his day, Lazorg is now a shadow of his former self. His ability to create has been destroyed by a stroke and his paramour and muse is in the arms of his greatest rival. It seems that all is lost until Lazorg receives a mysterious package from an old acquaintance. The parcel contains an organic substance that revitalises Lazorg, allowing him to paint once again. It is not long before the addictive powder takes control, and the aging artist finds himself drawn into a world stranger than anything he has ever imagined. There, he is taken in by local 'girl' Cruthsump and finds a new outlet for his prodigious creative talents.

The adventures of Lazorg from this point take on a dreamlike quality, an effect that grows stronger as the story progresses. One gets the sense that Di Filippo has allowed the story to flow from his unconscious with a minimum of interference and perhaps even of interpretation. Instead, his role has been to shape and guide, much as Lazorg creates his 'ideations'. This approach has enabled the symbolic, metaphorical aspects of the story to remain as pure and vivid as possible. At no stage does the reader become unmoored by the bizarre settings or the metaphysical aspects of the story. Di

Filippo has a particular gift for anchoring the reader, so that even in the interstices between worlds, a sense of place can always be found. However unexpected events are, however unusual characters and settings are, it is one of the greatest triumphs of *Cosmocopia* that it always feels real and relevant.

Cosmocopia is as much a puzzle as the jigsaw that accompanies it, but one where the pieces are interchangeable, constructed so that there are different permutations and solutions. Plot and themes are so smoothly patterned and layered, that at the conclusion, one feels like one has read the literary equivalent of Escher. As a novella, *Cosmocopia* is an unqualified success, and fans of this type of writing will have difficulty finding a more stimulating and enjoyable read.

Overall, the project is beautifully produced. The cover, jigsaw and colour print by Woodring make an excellent accompaniment to Di Filippo's story. While the book as *object* oozes class, some may feel surprised and disappointed that it hasn't been illustrated throughout. It should go without saying that Di Filippo doesn't need help communicating his vision, but when one recalls Dickens' novels illustrated by Phiz, or Pauline Baynes' work for C.S. Lewis, one can't help wishing the powers that be had taken the same approach in this instance. Woodring is a talented and extremely versatile artist, and while his work and exposure on this project will undoubtedly gain him new fans, it seems a shame that so little of what he can actually do has been revealed through this undertaking.

PAUL DI FILIPPO & JIM WOODRING:

How did you come to work together on this project?

PDF: I am an immense fan of Jim's brilliant work. When Payseur & Schmidt asked me to do a project with them, they also asked what my dream project would be. I instantly replied, "A book illustrated by Jim Woodring!" Jacob McMurray, one half of P&S, replied, "Oh, sure, I know Jim! We'll make it happen!" God bless their souls, they were both agreeable and true to their word!

JW: Then I got the call and said, "Oh boy, sure!"

Were you familiar with each other's work?

PDF: I've counted Jim and his wonderful wife Mary as pals for a number of years prior to the project, so we were always invested in each other's stuff.

JW: I'd read Paul's books and been amazed at his ability to conjure up worlds, as they say. Working with him was prestigious for me.

Jim, how does literature feed your work as an artist?

JW: Mostly by showing me how great human artistry can be. When I read a great book I'm never unaware of the fact that it is a performance, sometimes an amazing, unbelievable performance by someone who is pouring themselves into the task of making their vision clear to others. It's glorious.

Paul, how do the graphic arts influence your work as a writer?

PDF: I draw tons of inspiration from talented visual artists, having done fiction inspired by the work of Chris Mars and Todd Schorr among others. Their art inspires me to try to seek prose equivalents that will convey some of the same frissons.

What was the best book (novel, graphic novel, comic) of 2008?

PDF: I certainly did not read everything that came out in 2008, but my heart nonetheless always goes out to Los Bros

Hernandez, so I'd nominate *Love & Rockets* New Stories #1.

JW: *Cosmocopia*.

What next?

PDF: At the moment, I'm working on a story for Jonathan Strahan's *Eclipse* #3, an alternate history piece titled 'Yes We Have No Bananas'. Then comes my long-delayed (because of inertia and other real-world circumstances) sequel to *A Year in the Linear City*.

JW: I'm working on a 96-page Frank story called 'Weathercraft'.

Payseur & Schmidt (payseurandschmidt.com) are not your average publisher. They focus on high quality, deluxe editions and ephemera. They specialise in numbered, signed editions, often boxed to allow for the inclusion of such curiosities as postcards, posters and other 'Payseur & Schmidt awesomeness'. The contents of the *Cosmocopia* set include a hardcover copy of the novella, a 513-piece jigsaw puzzle, and *The Artist's Eye*, a colour print by Jim Woodring. Limited to 500 numbered copies, the package is bound by a numbered sash signed by Di Filippo and Woodring.

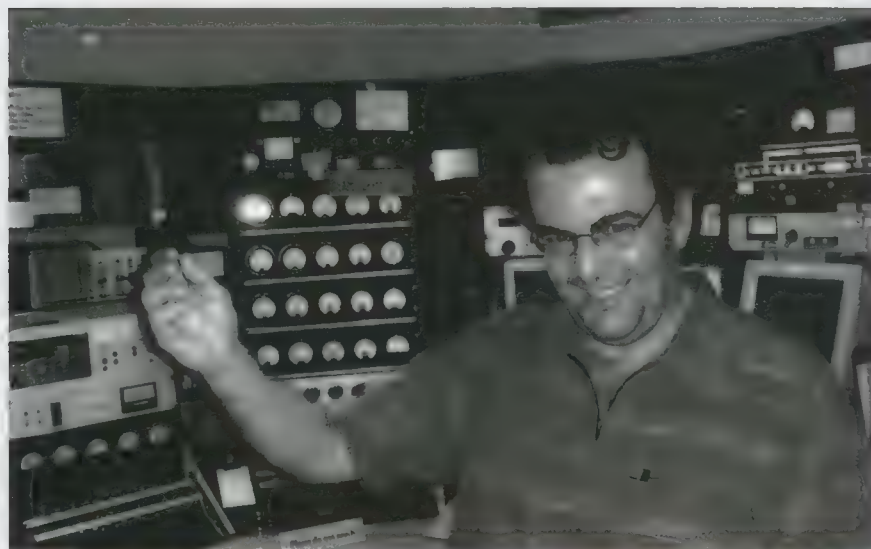


photo by Rudy Rucker

PAUL DI FILIPPO:

There are times when the artist Lazorg is either unable or unwilling to produce. Do you ever feel the same way?

I never did until the past year and a half. Starting in August 2007, my fiction output dropped dramatically, as I wrestled with questions about what 25 years as a writer meant. Then my dad died in November 2007 and that was a major kick in the pants. Since that period, I've been writing every day, but generally just reviews. Fiction writing requires a more creative aspect of the mind, an aspect that can be upset by doubts and radical changes.

Cosmocopia comes with an actual jigsaw. To what extent is the novella itself a jigsaw?

I tried in the writing of the book to offer

'pieces' of plot and story that needed to be 'assembled' without a lot of authorial hand-holding and guidance. So to that extent the story itself is a jigsaw. But in another sense, it's all very linear and pre-connected, so maybe the metaphor only goes so far.

Nia asks Lazorg if he ever got to the heart of his artistic quest – how close have you come?

I can see my literary grail shining in the distance, but it retreats one pace for every step I take! I think this is probably all for the best: no triumph short of death. It would be awfully boring to have reached all your goals by age thirty!

What (if anything) gives you a sense of community as a writer?

Print magazines. The internet. Conventions. And the work of my peers.

How has the internet contributed to your life as a writer?

I did a guest editorial for *Postscripts* magazine which goes into that matter in detail. The interested reader can find the text 'reprinted' on my blog (community.livejournal.com/theinferior4). Basically, it all comes down to a greater sense of community, easier research, more authenticity in one's fiction, and lots of naked people to pass the hours when inspiration fails!

How healthy is SF today?

SF is like a college athlete who thought he would always stay at the peak of physical shape just from having played good sports in his youth, and then neglected to exercise daily into adulthood. Probably pretty well toned, but with some flab around the middle. You can't get lazy, as a genre or individual, but need to keep pushing to stay honed and at the top of your game. Always look to cut the flab, as a genre or individual artist. And this metaphor is brought to you by someone who hates all forms of sport, so take it for what it's worth!

You profess to reading several newspapers a day. Is it a search for ideas or good old-fashioned work avoidance?

Oh, definitely ideas! Slices of life, breaking science news, political chicanery, strange names – it's all in the newspapers. Who could invent a Bernie Madoff? Better to read about him, then freely adapt the character.

You quizzed J.G. Ballard on Thomas Pynchon's observation "Surrealism [is in part] combining inside the same frame elements not normally found together, to produce illogical and startling effects..." How does this statement stand in relation to your work, Cosmocopia in particular?

I tend to think *Cosmocopia* is less surreal than estranging. It's an exercise in alien world-building where everything is equally strange, without any landmarks to signal the surreal. For instance, if a fisherman in a bucolic setting drops his line into a pond and pulls out a locomotive, that's surreal. But if, as in Zelazny's 'Doors of His Mouth...' a fisherman on another planet becomes the bait for a monster, that's just plain weird!

*I noticed a few parallels between **Cosmocopia** and Michael Bishop's **No Enemy But Time** (mostly concerning the protagonists' choice of mate and subsequent developments on the familial front). Most of our readers know that you are in close contact with Bishop (he came up with the title for **Cosmocopia**). Had either of you noticed the similarity? Was it intentional?*

Wow! Good catch! Amazing! Those parallels have not been seen or spoken of by either me or Mike! I read *No Enemy But Time* when it came out, decades ago, and not since. But it was probably at the back of my mind. Very curious. Of course, two models I consciously held in mind were Gardner Dozois' *Strangers* and PJ Farmer's *The Lovers*.

If you could improve one aspect of your game as a writer...

More emotional effects, rather than a sometimes distanced stance.

Cyberpunk, Steampunk, Ribofunk... Whatever next?

Well, shall I predict a new movement for the whole field, or just a new path for myself? I have long wanted to write a kind of 'clockpunk' (not my coinage) story about Bishop Berkeley, but the amount of research needed is daunting. Maybe I'll get rich, and be freed to live in libraries for a while...

*The Payseur & Schmidt edition of **Cosmocopia** is limited to 500 copies. Are there any plans for a wider release?*

I understand that these turbulent economic times make anyone hesitate to drop \$65 on a single book, and so I would love to see a less expensive edition come out. So, yes, I'm indeed trying to interest other publishers in a reprint. Alas, no luck thus far. So the P&S edition is the only source at the moment.

It looks like you both really enjoyed working on this project together. Do you have any plans to work together in the future?

Nothing would give me greater pleasure! But Jim and I have not discussed any future projects yet. Maybe in fifty years I could train myself to draw one-tenth as well as Jim, and we could do a ZAP-comix-style jam!



JIM WOODRING:

How relevant do you feel the picture of Frank Lazorg as an artist is?

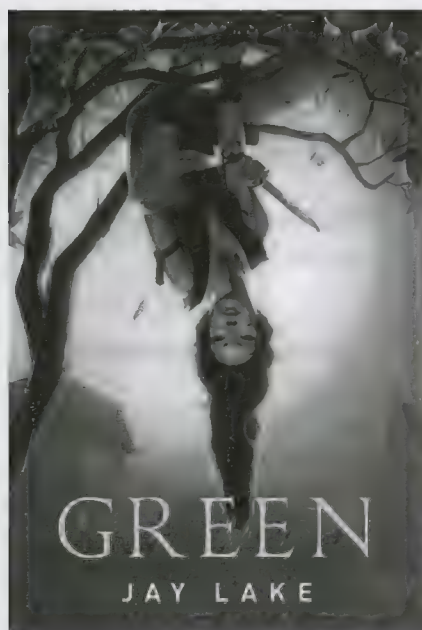
Relevant? You mean to real life? Well, the aging artist is a type of character that has real resonance with me, and I wonder what those last disintegrating years will be like when they finally come. I like the idea that there are adventures, even ones as appalling as the ones Lazorg endures, always at hand.

You have a character called Frank too... Could you tell us a little bit about him?

Frank is a generic anthropomorph who is ineducable, ignoble and innocent. He makes things happen and things also

happen to him. He lives in a place called the Unifactor and he has all kinds of fun there.

Jim Woodring (jimwoodring.com) is a Seattle-based artist, author, comic creator and toy designer specialising in the surreal and bizarre and downright unusual, all with a touch of humour thrown in. He is best known for his work for Fantagraphics, and his charming and deranged Frank cartoons. His various toys and oddities have delighted collectors for years, from new capsule toys to kits designed to leave JW fingerprints all over the owner's house. It has been said that his dreams are haunted by frogs but he remains in good spirits, regardless.



GREEN
Jay Lake

Tor, 368pp, £19.99 hb

Reviewed by Maureen Kincaid Speller

Green opens with an extraordinarily arresting image – the first memory of Green, or Girl as we first know her. She is following her father's ox, Endurance, as her grandmother's body is taken for burial, and her focus is on the 'silk' in which her grandmother's body is wrapped, sewn as it is with a small bell for every day of her life, a custom among Girl's people, so that 'her soul will be carried out of this life on the music of twenty-five thousand bells,'

markers of her life. This image will remain important throughout the novel, so much of which is centred on Green's attempts to hold on to her sense of self as those around her try to bend her to their purposes.

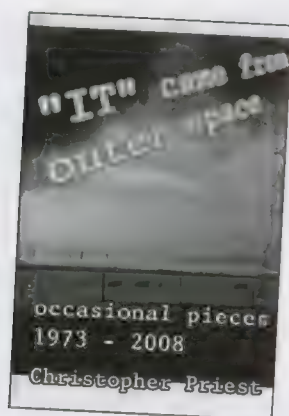
The attempts begin when she is taken from her home and parents at a very early age – sold, as she later realises – and travels with Federo, the 'maggot man', to Copper Downs, city of the immortal Duke. Here she is taken into a secluded 'Court', to be 'trained' for the Duke's purposes – either he will take her into his bed, or she will be given to someone else as a favour – and acquires a range of skills considered suitable for a noblewoman, which strikingly reflect the limited expectations for such women. Set against this is a very different, clandestine education provided by the Dancing Mistress, one focused on action and survival, suggesting that someone has another purpose in mind for Green.

We might be in familiar territory, with Green perhaps as the unrecognised last scion of a once noble house, being secretly trained to recover her destiny, but Lake doesn't take the easy road. Instead, the novel focuses as much on Green's intense desire to preserve her sense of self and find a future of her own choosing, as it does on the story's broader action. Rather than following a traditional pattern of quest, discovery and resolution, significant parts of the story are driven by Green's attempts to find her own way, using the distorted set of skills she has acquired, and then twisted by a need for her to respond to the failures of other. People plot but they don't plan; they achieve goals but don't consider the

consequences of doing so, and Green is wrenched from the path she is attempting to follow, having trained to become a Blade of the Lily Temple, to once again become part of someone else's scheme. One of the striking features of this novel is its low-key but persistent emphasis on how difficult it is for women to live in this world as individuals.

Having said that Green's concerns are personal, there is a quest of sorts, but this is equally unconventional. Green lives in a world where gods and humans live more immediately with one another, and although she begins life with no more fortune than her face, others believe she has acquired a power they can use. However, Green has always been an attentive scholar and has acquired a thoughtful attitude towards religion and a belief in a personal moral authority, all of which will be put to good use as the story unfolds. To say more would be to give away the novel's ending, but Green's interest in issues of belief gives this novel a strong foundation.

No matter how different types of fantasy are currently proliferating, in the end it all down to two simple approaches: produce more of the same as skilfully as one can, because there's a ready-made market for well-written formula, or else push at genre expectations and see what happens. These days, as a reader, I want the latter, and Jay Lake has produced the kind of fantasy I'm looking for, rich in detail (his invented cities seem particularly 'real'), strong though selective in action, rich in ideas and intensely thoughtful too. It was a pleasure to read this book, and a wrench to finish it.



GrimGrin Studio: christopher-priest.co.uk

**"IT" CAME FROM OUTER SPACE:
OCCASIONAL PIECES 1973-2008**
Christopher Priest

GrimGrin Studio, 246pp, £18.99 hb

Reviewed by Duncan Lunan

Several people have said to me that the quotation marks in this title are also in the title of the Ray Bradbury film, but I can't confirm that from the sources I have, including Jerry Yamamoto's essay on it in *Science Fiction America* (ed David Hogan, McFarland, 2006). The title piece is a riposte to Lester del Rey's 'The World of Science Fiction' (1979), rejecting del Rey's

attempt to specify what science fiction is. In the first essay, reprinted from *Vector*, 1985, Chris Priest adds "...in generalising about 'the field' or about 'literature' or about 'science fiction' or about 'it' a writer can talk in metaphor about his own work", particularly its autobiographical aspects, but there's little here about space. I'd hoped to learn something about his co-authorship of Helen Sharman's autobiography *Seize the Moment* (Gollancz, 1993), but it's not even included in the two lists of his published work.

The accounts of his early life and career include the first British Milford writers' conference in 1972. Evidently things had



LAVINIA

Ursula Le Guin

Gollancz, 304pp, £14.99 h/b

Reviewed by Laurence Osborn

Ursula Le Guin's latest novel is a re-working of the later volumes of Virgil's *Aeneid*. She tells the story of the arrival of Aeneas and the Trojans in Italy from the perspective of a minor character in Virgil's poem. Lavinia is the daughter of King Latinus of Laurentium and is destined to become Aeneas' second wife. And that is nearly all that Virgil tells us about her.

As Lavinia herself complains, Virgil slighted her life and scanted her in his

poem. But now Le Guin sets the record straight. She remains faithful to Virgil's account of how the Trojans settle in Italy, choosing to expand on Lavinia's life rather than alter the story as it has already been told. But she carries on where Virgil left off, telling us of the marriage of Lavinia and Aeneas and their life together until his death just three years after landing in Italy.

Lavinia can be read as a historical novel in the sense that Le Guin has lovingly re-created the relatively simple bronze age culture that ultimately gave birth to Rome. In the course of telling Lavinia's story, she paints a sympathetic picture of their daily lives. I was particularly struck by her portrayal of the part religion played in their lives – a much simpler, more pantheistic religion than that imagined by Virgil, a religion of ancestral spirits and numinous places.

At court, Lavinia cultivates a self-effacing persona to appease the uncertain temper of her mentally unstable mother. With her peers, she is altogether more spirited – running wild with girls of her own age, going alone to holy places, even spying on the Trojan camp when they first arrive in Italy. But she is an unlikely heroine by the standards of modern culture. Where we are conventionally encouraged to find freedom and fulfilment by expressing our individuality, Lavinia finds them *within* the constraints imposed upon her by society and ultimately learns to use those constraints to her advantage. She embraces her role as priestess of the household. Her marriage to Aeneas is a matter of destiny rather than live though she does grow to love him.

But there is another dimension to Lavinia, which transforms the novel from a simple historical novel into something much more experimental. Le Guin's Lavinia is aware of herself as the product of someone else's imagination. At several points she recounts visits to the sacred spring of Albunea where, across the centuries, she speaks with Virgil as he lies dying. So far, so strange. But even aware of her fictionality she doesn't hesitate to question and contradict her creator. And the strangeness is compounded by Virgil, who reveals that he too has a vague sense of being involved in another story – a story in which he guides someone he meets in a dark wood. And, to some extent, Virgil guides Le Guin's Lavinia as elsewhere he guides Dante.

But ultimately Lavinia like Dante is left to go on alone. The *Aeneid* breaks off with the death of Virgil's rival for the hand of Aeneas. Thereafter Lavinia has to forge her own path: three short years with Aeneas; years during which she brings up Silvius, the son she bore Aeneas, and faces down her stepson Ascanius; and then on into old age...and beyond? In contrast to the violent and very obvious ending of the *Aeneid*, *Lavinia* ends in quietness and mystery in the sacred grove that meant so much to Lavinia in life...a grove now haunted by a little owl that sometimes remembers what it was to have been a Latin princess who loved a Trojan hero.

I have read and enjoyed most of Ursula Le Guin's previous novels, but I think this one is her finest achievement. It certainly deserves to be at the top of your 'must read' list.

calmed down a bit when I began attending in the mid-70s: what I learned from that played a big part in shaping the Glasgow SF Writers' Circle ten years later, and that's now in its 22nd year. We're currently discussing 'when does borrowing become plagiarism?', which is the theme of an essay here on *The Dam Busters*, *Enemy Coast Ahead* and a novel *The Hiding Place*. That's in the section on 'Books and Writers'; the Milford account is one of two obituaries of Richard Cowper, accompanying pieces on Robert Sheckley, Stanislaw Lem and Anna Kavan.

Most of the essays are short, so there isn't scope for the bigger themes of Brian Aldiss's collection *The Shape of Further*

Things, for instance. As a result there's quite a bit of repetition in the section on H.G. Wells, and they might have benefited from editing into one longer analysis. Many pieces are book reviews, and Part Five 'Some Science Fiction' was interesting because I covered many of the same titles for the *Glasgow Herald* at the time. On *Rendezvous with Rama*, for instance, my concern was that the characters were lifted with only minor name changes from Arthur C. Clarke's first published novel *The Sands of Mars*, while the technology within Rama was indistinguishable from that in *The City of the Stars*. The rest is description of the habitat proposed by Cole and Cox

in *Islands in Space* (1966), and Chris Priest reckoned the novel is essentially a description of Bruce Pennington's cover painting for the 1974 Gollancz edition. The recent BBC two-part dramatisation focused on the political and religious aspects, which neither Chris nor I thought important.

In *The Sands of Mars* Clarke's author-character rediscovers one of his own stories, "written so long ago that he had completely forgotten the ending". But having reviewed *Fugue for a Darkening Island* for the *Herald*, I find it harder to believe that Chris could forget its complex structure as completely as he claimed in 2002.

An intriguing collection.



THE ACCORD

Keith Brooke

Solaris, 416pp, £7.99 pb

Reviewed by David Mathew

It might qualify as irony that the German word *Ohrwurm* – translated into English to represent a snatch of music that one repeats in one's head, over and over, throughout a day – came to mind on more than one occasion while reading *The Accord*. Along with the word springing to mind was Louis Armstrong singing 'We Have All the Time in the World', for reasons I shall come to shortly.

The novel is not set in Germany, although with the merest peep at what the author *doesn't* say, it could easily be set anywhere and everywhere. Why is this? Largely because of what the Accord is, but also because of the sentiments – expressed positively or negatively – of the key characters. But first, what is the Accord? Various described as 'a corrupt project from the outset', 'a blasphemous shadow world, occupied by simulacra and soulless echoes', and 'heaven', the Accord is a conglomeration of approved virtual realities, and a place (or series of places) that we might inhabit when we die.

So far it sounds simple, perhaps. It's not simple.

Noah is the architect of this astonishing achievement, and he is a man in love with the wife of a powerful politician, who in turn happens to be a man with an 'amplified lust for life', 'a mind deranged

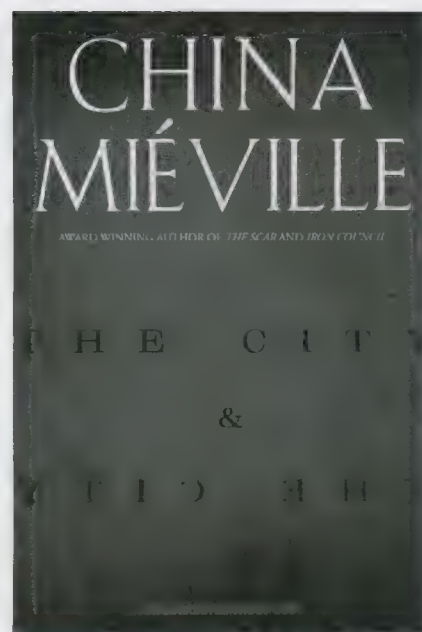
"This is hungry writing. Romantic, edgy, moving, tight and fast, The Accord is Keith Brooke on incandescent form and in an angry mood"

by passion and rage', and for whom the tag 'master of control' seems rather watered-down. The man is an influential thug, and very early in the novel he kills his wife (who has done nothing wrong at this point), which in turn leads to Noah's suicide and subsequent framing for the murder.

This should be Noah's way of meeting his beloved Priscilla in the 'heaven' that he has created, but of course there is a problem or two. Not every scrap of information has been approved for this universe-wide upload of information, for one thing; and 'heaven', being traditionally occupied by the dead, seems awfully quiet – even a 'heaven' London – until more people die to come up and say hello. What is worse, Noah cannot even *find* Priscilla, let alone build the life that he longed for while he and she were still corporeal.

There's a bigger problem than any of these, however. The politician who objected so to the love triangle is not content with letting his wife be with Noah, even if they happen to be dead. And he is prepared to stalk them, using any powers of mental or physical force at his command. While Noah clings to the notion of there being 'all the time in the world' – a fact in the universe(s) he has made – there is certainly a hostile interpretation to that same phrase. And heaven encompasses everywhere, does it not, if it's your own heaven?

As well as being a masterful story, *The Accord* is a feat of daring and accomplished composition. I loved the brisk movement from third person preterite to a more intimate first person; but even these tenses and voices are beautifully counterpointed by short sharp sections from Noah to 'you' (ie to Priscilla), which read as elegiac and mournfully joyful as a Bukowski poem. This is hungry writing. Romantic, edgy, moving, tight and fast, *The Accord* is Keith Brooke on incandescent form and in an angry, swearsy mood. *The Accord* offers a sense of obscene wonder the likes of which this reviewer might not have felt since Geoff Ryman's *The Child Garden*. This is Keith Brooke at his absolute best.



THE CITY AND THE CITY

China Miéville

Macmillan, 500pp, £17.99 hb

Reviewed by Mike Cobley

In 1963, Robert Silverberg wrote a short story called 'To See The Invisible Man' in which a man, due to antisocial behaviour, is sentenced to be invisible for a year, ie being sent to Coventry. Ordinary people are required by law not to speak with him or have any contact with him, for a year. It's been a while since I read it, but it ends with the man having reached the end of his sentence, walking out a free man, able to speak with ordinary people again. But then he sees another convict outside condemned to the same sentence, and out of a surge of compassion he breaks the law by walking up to the guy and hugging him.

A similar conceit is the fundamental structural maguffin in Miéville's *The City And The City*. Here we have two cities occupying the same geographical location, each with its own population, city authorities, its own buildings, streets and road names. Due to some unspecified grand schism far back in the past, the citizens of both cities have adopted psychological and social taboos against interacting or even seeing the other, even to the extent of not looking directly at things like buildings or cars specific to the other side.

The story, a first person narrative, begins in Beszel as a murder mystery investigated by Inspector Tyador Borlu; later, Borlu crosses into the other city, Ul Qoma, where

he has to maintain the strict taboo of not recognising or interacting with his own city, which he can see all around him. The taboo and separation of the cities is maintained by a mysterious organisation called Breach, who seem to have access to all-encompassing, over-riding powers thereby making sure that radicals and tourists do not wreck the intricately careful mass blindness.

This was an interesting read – at the start, I felt that the prose was too colourless (yeah, that transparent prose thing!) and flavourless, add to which...I just didn't

(and still don't) buy the central conceit of selective social blindness. On a personal reality-check level, it just didn't seem remotely plausible. However, China Miéville spins a mean tale and I was intrigued enough by some of the unstated possibilities to keep reading. I'm glad I did – the story developed some nicely weird situations and led me down some unexpected avenues. So all in all, this was an enjoyable and thought-provoking book, which also reminded me how to believe in a coupla impossible things before and after breakfast!

PSYCHOLOGICAL METHODS TO SELL SHOULD BE DESTROYED: STORIES

Robert Freeman Wexler

Spilt Milk Press, 80pp, \$5.00 chapbook

Reviewed by Paul Kincaid

Let us ignore the truly terrible title.

Let us ignore also the introduction by Zoran Zivkovic, which seems to be an introduction to the heroism of small press publishers and not at all to Robert Freeman Wexler, still less to the stories collected.

No, let us turn straight to the stories, which is, after all, what matters here. They are exercises in surrealism, an increasingly dominant mode among the upcoming generation of writers of the fantastic. But where some seem to feel that all they need to do is pile absurdity upon absurdity, not realising how hard it is to attract and retain the sympathy of the audience when anything can happen and so there are no consequences, Wexler introduces carefully controlled absurdity as if this is the way the world really is. It is that assumption of the real underlying the surreal that makes these much the better stories.

Well, some of them. The first story, 'Suspension', simply has a four-armed man falling over in the snow. There is no explanation for the extra limbs, they attract no attention from the other characters, they do nothing to shape the personality of the protagonist, they have no effect upon the story (such as it is). The effect is a sense of pointlessness about the exercise, and the second story, 'Tales of the Golden Legend', though it has an undeniable charm, is not much better.

But work your way past this opening (an off-putting start to any collection), and

the stories suddenly begin to accumulate power and interest. 'Indifference' probably tries a little too hard to be 'significant' and so ends up feeling more pretentious than it should. But 'Valley of the Falling Clouds', set in an old West of unexpected dangers, including the clouds of the title and the fungi they release, is full of stunning images. And 'The Green Wall', about an inspiring glimpse of jungle that offers hope in a dispiriting urban America, is also a fascinating working-out of ideas.

Best of the bunch, however, is the final novella, 'The Sidewalk Factory: A Municipal Romance', which is worth the whole of the rest of this chapbook put together. It is a sort of anti-utopia: the inhabitants of an island state subject to increasingly absurd government decrees. The geography of the island, its regimented social structure, and its relationships with the client states along the mainland all recall Thomas More's novel, but then it is twisted to distort the image just enough to make it interesting. I loved the fact that if you were able to accept the surreal elements of the world, the whole thing made a coherent sense. This was a place just on the edge of being believable, and within that shape everything the characters do and everything that is done to them makes perfect sense. This could become one of my favourite stories of the year.

Spilt Milk Press: electricvelocipede.com

THE SOLARIS BOOK OF NEW SCIENCE FICTION VOLUME 3

George Mann, ed

Solaris, 416pp, £7.99 pb

SUBTLE EDENS

Allen Ashley, ed

Elastic Press, 326pp, £7.99 pb

PREMONITIONS: CAUSES FOR ALARM

Tony Lee, ed

Pigaspus Press, 160 pp, £5.95 pb

SUBTERFUGE

Ian Whates, ed

Newcon Press, 304pp, £29.99 limited edition hb, £16.99 hb, £9.99 pb

FUTURE BRISTOL

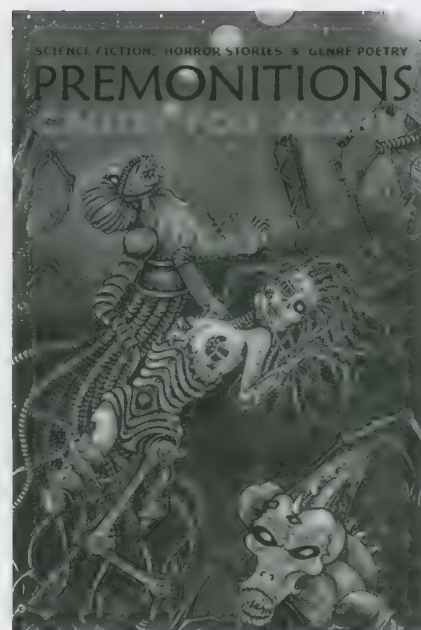
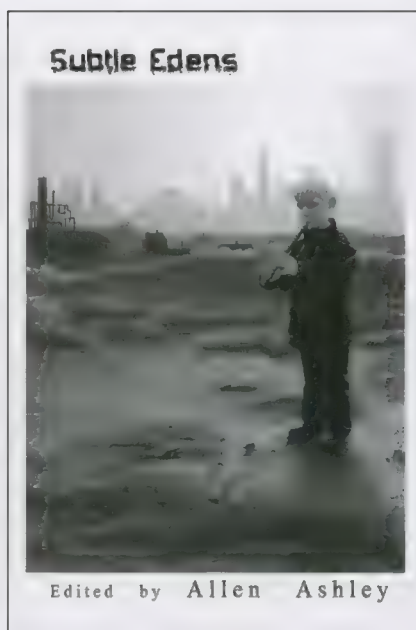
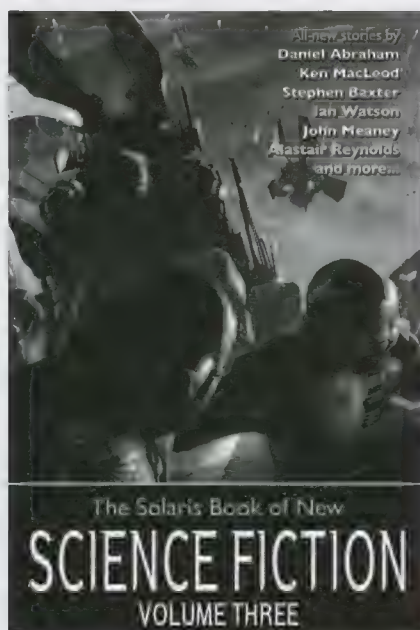
Colin Harvey, ed

Swimming Kangaroo Books, 240pp, £9.99 pb

Reviewed by Andy Hedgecock

George Mann begins *The Solaris Book of New Science Fiction Volume 3* with an appeal for a better balance of light and shade in sf – for spaceships as well as dystopias. My hackles tend to rise when editors and critics take a prescriptive approach to the tone and thematic concerns of stories, but the piece does highlight Mann's devotion to diversity in sf – and his commitment to finding and publishing entertaining short fiction. And – to an impressive extent – the quality and variety of the 15 stories on offer reflects the ethos set out in the introduction. The collection takes in a raft of sf subgenres – philosophical, noir, spy thriller, hard sf, alternate reality, steampunk – and delivers to a consistently high standard.

I'll discuss a few highlights here: Paul Di Filippo's contribution picks up the gauntlet Mann casts before his readers and writers with 'Providence' an engaging, funny and bleak tale of a collapsing society of intelligent machines hooked on vinyl records. 'The Fixation' by Alastair Reynolds concerns an ancient geared artefact – the Mechanism – that has influenced science and philosophy in several civilisations and links parallel versions of Earth. Reynolds coherently sets out the possibilities and risks of entropy exchange and offers a profound reflection on the nature of reality and the human condition without compromising the flow of his narrative for a second. Ken MacLeod's 'I Think, Therefore I Am' is a snappy philosophical



"Nina Allan is developing into one of the finest stylists in modern genre fiction...Allan's imagery is rich and resonant, and there are few writers with her talent of uncovering the strange within the familiar with such clarity and precision"

gag – a reductio ad absurdum of the notion of surrendering one's judgment to knowledge-based tools. A very short piece, but it's genuinely witty and provocative.

Paul Cornell's 'One of Our Bastards is Missing' – a blend of steampunk and supernatural realism – is set in an alternative quasi-Victorian British Empire featuring time anomalies, doppelgangers and the heroic Major Jonathan Hamilton. Bursting at the seams with energy and invention this, the second of Cornell's Major Hamilton stories, is hugely entertaining. Encore.

There's an urgent need for stories that enable us to deal with incoherence, uncertainty and disintegration, and several contributors to *Subtle Edens* are among the most perceptive guides to unmapped territories of contemporary life. Having said that, I'm far from convinced by the rationale underpinning the collection and I was left with a sense that it was being published five years too late to be useful. Allen Ashley's introduction seems to be fighting literary battles that are already won and his assertion that self-referential

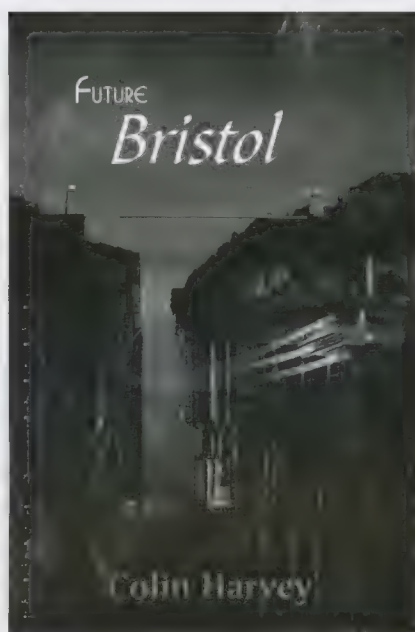
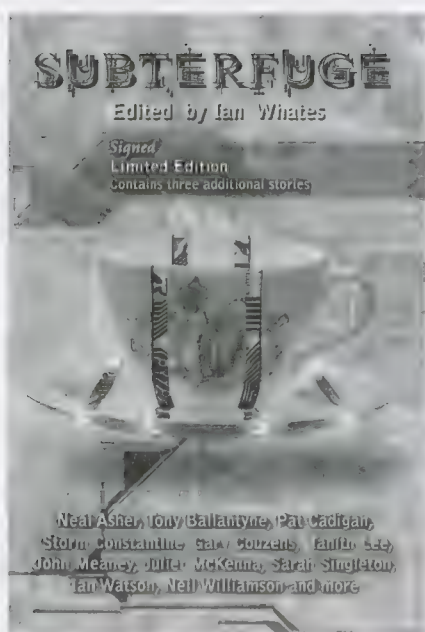
and genre bending TV would have been impossible without slipstream fiction is just plain daft: What about *Gangsters* (1975)? Or the early work of Dennis Potter? And while Jeff Gardiner's essay on the protean development of slipstream is interesting, it left me with no clear idea of precisely what the anthology is inviting us to celebrate.

There are 21 stories here, ranging from the powerfully compelling to the utterly forgettable. Nina Allan is developing into one of the finest stylists in modern genre fiction: 'Darkroom' is a subtle story and obsessive tale of loss and a literary enigma. Allan's imagery is rich and resonant, and there are few writers with her talent of uncovering the strange within the familiar with such clarity and precision. Joel Lane's laconic and beautifully crafted 'Alouette' delivers brutal imagery counterpointed by music that conjures airbrushed memories of childhood innocence. It's a disturbing and poignant exploration of the pervasiveness of violence in society, and the uses to which it is put. Gary Fry's 'Out of Time' is disquieting, smart and tremendous fun: Fry plays with an array of horror tropes to bring a whole new

meaning to the notion of losing one's bearings. 'Welcome to Rodeomart' by Steve Rasnic Tem is a darkly humorous satire on consumerism. Less successful are Daniel Bennett's 'My Copy of Robinson', a fictional reflection on Chris Petit's cult novel in which character, plot and meaning collapse into a meta-fictional black hole; and Toiya Kristen Finley's 'Conspiracy Courts the Maiden' which relies for its impact on a radical approach to layout rather than an original voice or resonant storytelling.

Causes for Alarm is the sixth collection in Tony Lee's *Premonitions* series. Its 15 stories and five genre poems cut across a range of genres – sf, horror and fantasy – and adopt a refreshingly broad range of style and tones: traditional and experimental; serious and comic; passionately prophetic and entrancingly enigmatic. Lee's contributors include old stagers in the premonitions repertory company as well as several newcomers. The quality is as varied as the blend, but *Causes for Alarm* is an energetic and passionate collection.

One of the strangest but strongest stories is Matt Bright's 'Big Picture', a terse and alienating exploration of image-making with meta-fictional leanings. Other high points include 'Jaw Jaw' by Jim Steel (our book reviews editor) which blends linguistic speculation and corporate satire to great effect; the rich and unsettling urban landscape of Sue Lange's enigmatic 'Jump'; and the playful but dark wit of William Jackson's tale of desperation of failed communication 'Mould & Mildew'.



"This is an uneven collection, but it offers enough that is entertaining and provocative to make it a rewarding read and several of its idiosyncratic tales of terror tap into the fears, anxieties and uncertainties of the current zeitgeist"

There are a few duds: Patrick Hudson's 'Insured for Murder' took me on a satirical exploration of the increasingly blurred boundaries of surveillance and entertainment – a territory mapped with far greater precision and wit in a short segment in William Gibson's *Virtual Light*. And the faux-medievalism of Cyril Simsa's 'Master Juggler' took me nowhere at all.

This is an uneven collection, but it offers enough that is entertaining and provocative to make it a rewarding read and several of its idiosyncratic tales of terror tap into the fears, anxieties and uncertainties of the current zeitgeist.

If I'm to be persuaded to lash out thirty quid on a collectible anthology I expect production values along the lines of the Canongate Myths series. Even Sir Fred Goodwin might wince at the idea of raiding his pension piggybank for the privilege of owning one of 150 copies signed by the 19 contributors, and enjoying three stories not included in the paperback edition.

Enough whinging about the cost of the *Subterfuge* limited edition: as the title suggests, tricks and stratagems provide

the unifying theme. It's a risky enterprise: if there's one thing more irritating than stories distorted to fit around an abstract theme, it's the clumsy contrivance of literary deception, but Ian Whates has deftly avoided these pitfalls in selecting an engaging and original selection of stories from established and up-and-coming writers.

Cream of the crop are Dave Hutchinson's 'Multitude' set in a Britain brutally reclaimed by elves; Sarah Singleton's haunting and affecting tale of love, loss, displacement and dreams in Russia's Decembrist Revolt; and Nik Ravenscroft's re-engineering of familiar sf machinery in a tale of time, a river and an enigmatic encounter. Also worthy of mention are an assured blend of fantasy and psychological horror from Neil Williamson, and Storm Constantine's complex and elegant tale that takes some interesting liberties with familiar fantasy tropes (hardback only). The balance of *Subterfuge* tilts towards fantasy rather than sf, but it's a consistently strong collection in which nearly every story has a strong sense of character and place. There are just a couple of

disappointments. For me, the violence of Neal Asher's 'The Rhine's World Incident', set in the author's Polity universe, is emotionally uninvolved and the story is marred by a clunky final sequence. I've been an admirer of Tanith Lee's work for as long as I can remember but her reworking of the tropes of the gothic shipwrecking tale makes nothing original with its all too familiar material.

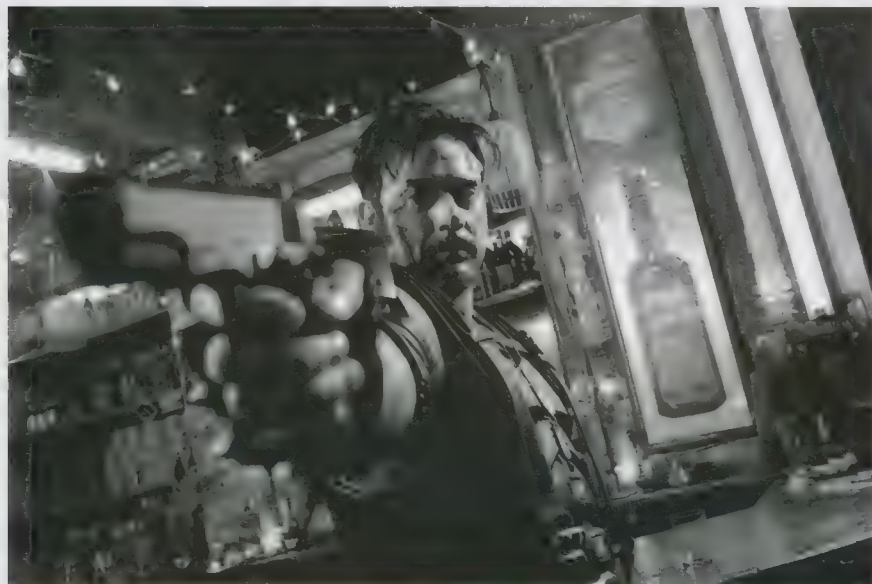
I approached Colin Harvey's *Future Bristol* with a degree of wariness – jaded by collections relying on the judicious name-checking of a few well known street names and landmarks in a half-hearted attempt to capture the spirit of a city. Harvey's contributors avoid that trap, but if the "Brizzle" theme isn't contrived, it is faintly developed in some stories. In the end I was more convinced by Harvey's salute to the resurgence of British sf in his engaging introduction than his 'celebration of the city'.

There are three exceptionally good stories in *Future Bristol*, four that are solidly entertaining and two that didn't work for me at all. There is an interesting blend of genres, sometimes in the same story.

The collection opens and closes with stories that really couldn't be set anywhere but Bristol: Liz Williams' 'Isambard's Kingdom' is a complex but engaging tale of moral choice and determinism that flips between Bristol past and future and taps into the city's architecture, history and mythology; while Jim Mortimore's 'The Sun in the Bone House' – which provides an impressive finale to the collection – is an astonishingly ambitious psycho-geographical cum archaeological investigation of Bristol from the Anglo-Saxon era to the far future. The story races through layers of time in dense but accessible, terse but musical prose poetry like a condensed version of Aiden Dun's *Vale Royal*. It could have descended into gimmickry and incoherence but Mortimer's writing is beautifully controlled.

Another highlight is Joanna Hall's bravura genre blending of swashbuckling piracy and hard-boiled detection – I've seldom had so much fun while musing on the thin line between historical icon and mythic archetype. Two less successful stories are Gareth L. Powell's charming but inconsequential sf riff on *It Could Happen to You* and Nick Walters' predictable tale of alien encounters and specimen hunting.

Mutant Popcorn Nick Lowe



Does Michael Jackson's nose have an intrinsic field? Already in the mid-eighties a series of secret experiments was under way that would attempt to find an answer. Really, it should be just a question of reassembling the components in the correct sequence. But when so many scalpels of steel and of light have taken to pieces something as delicate as a human sense organ, or as tightly-packed with clockwork as **Watchmen**, and disassembled it and reassembled it over and over across a twenty-year period, is there anything left apart from gravity to hold things together, or have the decades of surgery destroyed the last cartilaginous scrap of structural tissue? If you yank off the mask, what will

you see? A pretty butterfly? Some nice flowers? Dog with head split open?

Watchmen was pronounced dead on the operating table at the start of the nineties with the collapse of the Terry Gilliam version, since when Alan Moore has argued for its essential unfilmability on the grounds that the story depends essentially, rather than incidentally, on the grammar of the comics form. On the level of narrative, this has always been rather debatable. Of course the densely interconnected multidimensional grids of information are a formalist triumph, and one of the key reasons why the fourth instalment in particular remains as good a candidate as any for the single greatest issue in comics

history – combining as it does Moore's most dazzling demonstration of the power of the comics panel and page to tell stories in ways unavailable to other media with a narrative content that showcases the power of sf, and specifically of science-fictional superhero comics, to deliver emotional payloads of a kind and force simply unavailable to non-genre forms. (Significantly, this is the section of the story that comes off least effectively in Zack Snyder's film – though its montage-based translinear narrative, told *La Jetée*-style in stills and voiceover, turns out one of the more effective bits of DC's own "Motion Comic".)

Yet it would be perverse to deny that many of Moore, Gibbons, and Higgins' key techniques map quite readily back on to the film devices from which they were originally burgled by Eisner and others in the golden age, right down to the match cuts, visual echoes, and Moore's later-regretted tic of forced dialogue lap. And now that films are deliberately crafted to be watched over and over on technology that can pause, backtrack, and freeze, even the density of background detail can be appreciated on screen, sometimes actually with increased clarity. (I'm abashed to admit it was only with a second viewing of the film version that I finally noticed the play with Rorschach's "Fine like this" that had passed me by for 22 years.) Even the back-of-issue supporting materials have a counterpart in the form of DVD featurettes – literally, in the case of *Under the Hood*. Above all, though, the linear story is strong enough in itself to stand independently of its medium. As early as 1988 the great Sam Hamm succeeded in condensing the essentials, with Moore's acquiescence if not quite his blessing, into a brilliant first draft for what would become the unfulfilled Gilliam version, which bit the dust only because even Joel Silver couldn't raise the budget. Hamm himself later endorsed the slightly stronger argument that *Watchmen*'s universe and story is a product of a particular cultural moment when the cold war looked likely to escalate rather than abate, and the shadow of nuclear apocalypse was fully and terrifyingly felt in a way that's hard now to imagine for those who didn't live through it. But if that slightly dilutes the immediacy of the doomsday-clock scenario, it certainly hasn't put off readers – to the consternation of Alan Moore, of course, who would like nothing more than for it to fall out of print

as originally planned so that the rights would revert to its creators.

The most convincing argument against the filmability of *Watchmen*, in fact, is one I've never seen clearly made: that its narrative density and resonance results directly from its exploitation of the unique tropology of superhero comics, to the extent that only someone who's grown up with the genre, and invested hugely in its mythologies both imaginatively and emotionally, can fully appreciate its power. *Watchmen* gave itself the assignment of creating and annihilating an entire comics universe in a single story – and a comics universe, let's remember, is the largest form of narrative artifact so far developed in human history, Roz Kaveney's Big Dumb Objects of narrative continuity. Even in the unbelievable future we inhabit in which, against all reason, the geeks have inherited the earth and superhero narrative has assumed its destined place at the very pinnacle of blockbuster filmmaking, it's been a huge gamble whether the mass general audience is sufficiently literate in the deep language of comics to understand

particularly at the digital end; he's very good at storyboards, a medium in which he's more comfortable than he is with script; he recognises that Alan Moore writes better dialogue, and usually better plotting, than any of his adapters; he has previous in comics adaptation, and in treating his source with respect whether or not it frankly deserves it. He's also a seasoned IMAX veteran from *300*, and whatever else one thinks of his particular *Watchmen* it feels more completely at home on the big, big screen than any other mainstream film release to date. Yet the crucial quality he's brought to *Watchmen* is none of these, but leverage: the post-*300* clout to get away with restoring things that the studios wanted out, including the eighties setting, Nixon, Mars, the Minutemen, the flashbacks, and (most amazing to see up there on the screen) the Tijuana bible. Indeed, one of the surprises about the finished version was how much original dialogue had been restored at a very late stage, later than the undated Alex Tse draft leaked in September 2007. It's amazing that it took twenty years to see

drafts, Veidt was still getting crushed by the owlship under remote control, which not only takes a crude Gordian cleaver to the final moral conundrum but leaves Rorschach's journal with no job left to do. Far the best ending was Hamm's all-new solution, in which Dr Manhattan reset the mechanism of time to the moment of his creation and saved Jon Osterman from turning into him, whereupon the *Watchmen* universe collapsed and spat Nitey, Silky, and (he lives!) Rorschach out into our-world NYC where they're only known as characters in a comic. Snyder's version has settled, less radically, for cloning the ending of *The Dark Knight*, which at least leaves the characters in the correct positions for the final moral ballet, as well as integrating Dr Manhattan more centrally into the scientific and geopolitical storyline.

One of the most refreshing things about this *Watchmen* is its contemptuous indifference to Hollywood protocols of act structure, running time, flashback quota, and indeed hostage lines for the ranks of watch-watchers (at the two-hour mark, "Can't you just tell me how this ends and save all the trouble?"). Ironically in light of the prominence given to Rorschach's "Never compromise" slogan, the one place where *Watchmen* has capitulated abjectly to Hollywood norms is in the interpretation of its characters, with only Patrick Wilson's Nite Owl and Jeffrey Dean Morgan's Comedian emerging largely undamaged. Jackie Earle Haley's Rorschach looks the part masked and unmasked, but fails wretchedly in the more important role of the story's principal narrative voice, delivered here in a mangasque Christian Bale growl that only movie people could possibly think sounded like someone would speak. Laurie Juspeckzyk's character has been softened of its dry wit and wisecracking and no longer uses the word "shit", though anyone with the faintest ear for dialogue should appreciate that "Omigod I'm on Mars" is a completely different utterance and one which Moore's version of the character would never voice. A lot of work has gone into making Dr Manhattan's responses make actorly sense in the light of his chronosynclastic time perception, but his new thing for lashings of eyeliner overwrites his quietly understated lingering humanity with a sad-clown cartoon face; while Adrian Veidt's otherwise rather nicely rewritten line "I'm not a comic-book villain" is unfortunately undercut by the fact that

"So much of what is wonderful in the original *Watchmen* is here when it didn't have to be"

and feel about this story in the way that it asks, or indeed whether something like the relationship between the Golden and Silver Ages even means anything for a generation that's grown up post-either. Certainly after the second-weekend takings crash in the US the language of disappointment seemed to be set as system default; and lead screenwriter David Hayter, the principal architect of what would become the Snyder version, had pleaded with fans after the first week of release to bump up the take by going to see it again in its second week, or nobody would ever again greenlight a comics-based project that dared to aim beyond the *Spider-Man* audience. (Unless it's *Road to Perdition* or *A History of Violence*, presumably. But if you ever want to see that Sandman film, he has a point.)

Now, Zack Snyder may not be the smartest man in the world, bless him, as anyone who's tried to keep awake through his *300* commentary will attest, but he's nevertheless brought a number of important qualities to the project that a Gilliam, Aronofsky, or Greengrass couldn't. He's extremely proficient technically,

that "I did it thirty-five minutes ago" was a better line than "thirty minutes" or "I did it just now", but at least they got there in the end. Hayter, who was with the project from 2000–5 before walking when Paramount pulled the plug on the Greengrass version, tells of endless gruelling fights with imbecilic notes from the studio. There were always just too many watchmakers.

And some things have been undeniably improved in the undoing. *Watchmen*'s narrative was padded from the start when the alternate-issue origin stories were grafted in to bump the run up from six issues to twelve, and though these character-centred episodes mostly came out as the strongest chapters, the structure became something of a straitjacket in the second half, where it's perfectly obvious that issues 9–10 flow much better the other way around (as they're finally allowed to do in the film). The ending remains a bit of a Jackson's nose, but it was always clear that Moore's B-movie McGuffin had to go, if far from clear what should replace it, and the final version is a lot less awful than some of its precursors. As late as the early Tse

he's presented from the start as exactly that, with his lip-curling delivery, Nazi accent, and a file prominently labelled "Boys" in his office, which would actually be pretty funny if the whole performance weren't so grotesquely homophobic. It's depressing that they can't see how wrong a note it is for Rorschach to address Ms Juspeczyk as "Laurie"; and I still don't really understand the reasoning behind the chronological refit that has moved the *Crimebusters* (here, following Hamm, renamed *Watchmen*) from 1966 to 1970, which makes no sense in comics-history terms and puts Dr Manhattan's brief crimefighting career after Nam rather than before it, leaving a nasty suspicion that the studio simply wanted their female lead to be younger.

Nevertheless, while this may not be the best of the *Watchmen* we might have had, it's a massive improvement on other post-millennial versions; and if Snyder's interpretation hasn't the wit or sparkle that the Hamm/Gilliam version promised, it's partly because that was mooted at a time when the source was still sufficiently fresh and plastic as to permit more radical tinkering with the clockwork, infected by the exuberance and verve of British-invasion comics in one of the industry's all-time creative peaks. So much of what is wonderful in the original *Watchmen* is here when it didn't have to be: the hands on the beerglass; Captain Carnage; "All we ever see of stars are their old photographs." Of course there are moments of monumental awfulness, but they pass, and there are plenty of compensating moments of real inspiration: not just the showy things like the richly staged credits montage of alternate history in hi-def Zapruder time, but the dozens of deft little narrative workarounds like "Where's my face?", "Nixon had him keeping tabs on us", and "I know what Jon would say." The biggest shock on first viewing is the cutting of Hollis Mason's death, but when you go back and look at it the plot thread didn't really go anywhere. The climax has been more hit by budgetary squeeze, losing both the vivarium and the owl-bikes – with the result that Hendrix now incongruously sings the "two riders were approaching" line over a shot of them trudging through the snow instead. And yet the willingness to preserve that key soundtrack moment, even when its actual point has been stripped away, is touching in itself; and if the blue fairy has anything to say about the president's remarkable nose, he has the discretion to keep it to himself.



Not so differently, Paul McGuigan's **Push** is an ambitious attempt to create a big superhero mythos within the margins of a single film, with Chris Evans and Dakota Fanning as fugitive members of a multistranded tribe of superpowered mutants living among us while the authorities seek to hunt them to extinction. Even with the basic familiarity assumed with versions of this scenario in *X-Men* and *Heroes*, it's a lot to try to squash into a self-contained film, with a large cast, elaborate backstory, and hugely convoluted plot of setups, double-crosses, and an ultimate suitcase of plot, climaxing in a series of bravura twists you see coming from early on (the title is a whopping clue) but can't quite see how they'll ever get them to work. Indeed, much of the point of the film is that our heroes have to outmanoeuvre an antagonist who, like the audience, can foresee their every move, to which Evans has a bold answer: "What if nothing we did made sense?" And sure enough, the final half-hour is so magnificently overplotted that nobody could really say by the end whether it did. But the Hong Kong settings are vivid and spectacular, and the climactic telekinetically assisted fistfight on a half-built skyscraper has verve even after being precognitively preempted in *Dark Knight*; while much work has gone into creating a striking new character and image for Fanning, who gets to overact ludicrously (including a first drunk scene), but still looks reassuringly lantern-headed, popeyed, and weird.

Franklyn is a rather amazing Brit flick with a complex multistranded plot that cuts between our world and the vaguely Miévillean fantasy noirescape of "Meanwhile City", an alternate London in which the Bank of England has (aptly enough) morphed into the Fortress of Ultimate Darkness from *Time Bandits*, and where Ryan Philippe plays a Rorschach-like figure on a quest for revenge against the shadowy hierarch of a society where religion is compulsory but baroquely diverse. (This doesn't really make sense, but the film has an answer up its sleeve to explain why it doesn't need to.) One of the film's boldest pleasures is how long it keeps us guessing about how all this relates to the three seemingly disconnected this-world strands: Eva Green's art project of filming her own suicide attempts;

churchwarden Bernard Hill's quest for his missing son; and Sam Riley's pursuit of his former childhood sweetheart whom everyone else insists was imaginary. Even the basic network of relationships between characters and locations takes its time over establishing itself, and when characters start to leak between worlds there's a profoundly satisfying narrative disorientation of a kind that film rarely allows its audiences to linger in. Heavy hints are dropped that one of these worlds is a creation of one particular character in the other; but which, and who, and how, and why is the creator so elusive to track down?

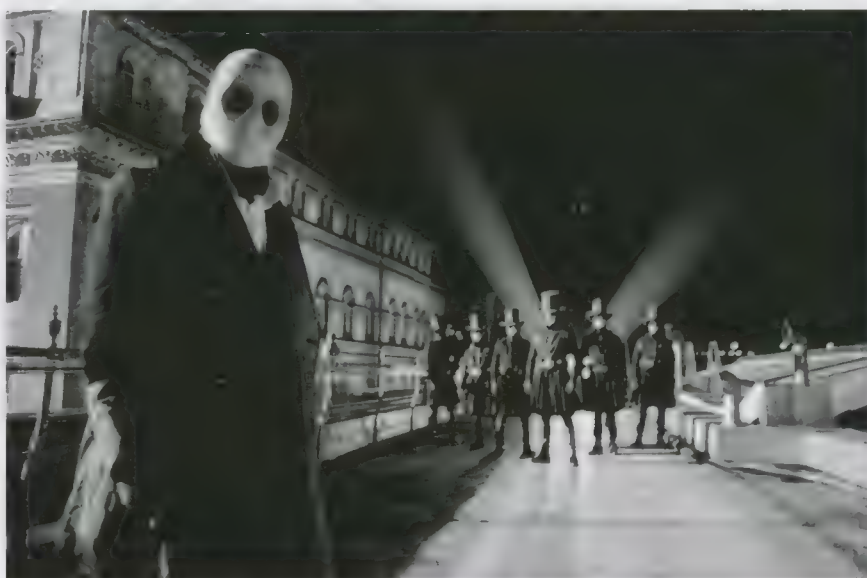
Writer-director Gerald McMorrow's first gig was as a teenage runner on the fondly-remembered Richard Stanley's *Hardware*, the distillation of eighties UK



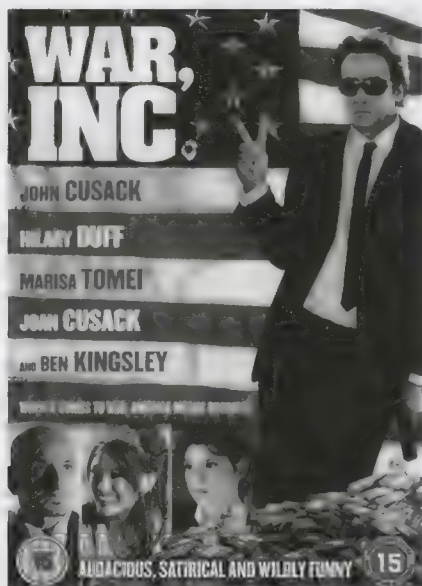
As if by the synchronous design of a cosmic watchmaker, some of the same religious and familial issues are indeed played out in the cruder accents of Hollywood dialect in Alex Proyas' **Knowing**. Nicolas Cage vehicles are always a bumpy ride, but they do have the power to draw films into being around Cage's distinctive leading-man persona that at their best have a loopiness you'd be unlikely to see in a Will Smith project. *Knowing* is a particularly extreme case, beginning innocuously enough as a modest if batty numerological fantasy about an MIT prof coming into possession of a bit of paper that predicts disasters, and escalating by degrees into a kind of Hollywood version of Don McKellar's *Last Night* in which the end of the world *actually happens* and no amount of creepy "whisper people" standing around in the woods can prevent it from being as completely hero-proof a narrative as you're ever likely to see on film. Cage may be a hotshot astrophysicist, but even he can't renegotiate the laws of the cosmos; and by degrees you realise that whatever this film is going to pull out of the bag for a feelgood ending, it's going to be something pretty out-there. Until the final half-hour, it's possible to rest gently in the arms of the illusion that the title refers merely to foreknowledge of things to come, and that the crudely-shoehorned early discussions of the Drake equation and randomness *versus* determinism are what the film is actually about; that Cage's dad issues as the scientist son of a pastor are incidental character-deepening by numbers; and that the references to Ezekiel are nothing more outrageous than a decorative screenwriters' conceit. But by the time apocalypse and revelations arrive, it becomes clear that references in the dialogue to a very different kind of knowing have been part of an elaborate higher design, which doesn't seem to mind that it's significantly at odds with the actual ending.

Yet if much of this seems a capitulation to middle-American end-times piety, at least the final scenes have the guts to stay within the boundaries of science, with Cage's inexplicable conversion to a more primitive mode of knowing elbowed aside in favour of a purely science-fictional conclusion, even if it does involve a final money shot of children running across the plains of heaven through *Gladiator* wheat in their new robes of beige under a moon as big as in the movies. It's still one of those films that rely on plunging you from plot point to plot point fast enough that you never have time to stop and think back on the manifold absurdities of the form "If what's really going on is X, then why the hell did they Y?" Indeed, Cage's colleague tells it to his face: "Right now my scientific mind is telling me to have nothing more to do with this, and you're shit too." (Which he is, though I have reluctantly to assume I misheard.) But if Cage's character is a weak spot, Rose Byrne and the kid leads are excellent, the catastrophe set pieces are genuinely extraordinary, and the sheer "where is this going and will I be able to gibber quietly enough not to be ejected?" casts a spell like no other. Once you know, it's no big deal. But as Dr Manhattan says to Adrian Veidt, "I'd almost forgotten the delights of not knowing; of uncertainty." Especially in the face of Armageddon.

comics sensibility on film; and *Watchmen* (alongside *V for Vendetta*) is clearly an influence, not least on the powerful and unsettling contrasts between the tropes of comics narrative and their counterparts in the real world. This is a film in which people who speak below the natural male vocal register are clearly not quite right in the head, even if they happen to be the creators of the world. McMorrow's dialogue isn't as strong as his visual and narrative sense, which falters only at the overblown and protracted climax. But this is a wonderful film in a distinctively British tradition, with beautiful concept art and a defiantly grown-up attitude to the infantilities that underlie Hollywood fantasy narrative. If only it was Spanish they'd already be tooling up the Hollywood remake.



Laser Fodder Tony Lee



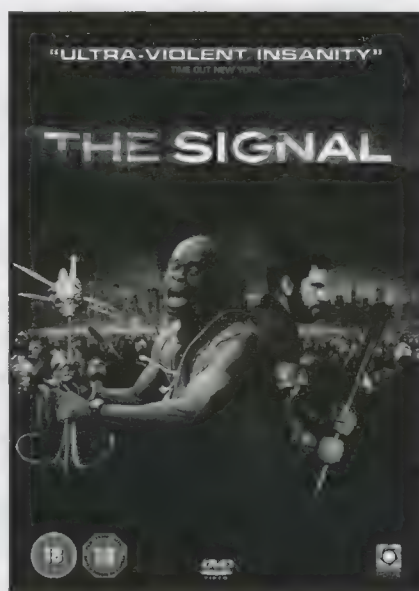
The final act of *Grosse Pointe Blank* (1997) sees Dan Aykroyd's 'Grocer' attempting to recruit hero Marty (John Cusack) into a hit-men's union. A decade later, in a parallel world hellhole, Aykroyd is a former US Vice President, amoral cheerleader for grubby American imperialism, sending this flipside realm's troubleshooter assassin Hauser (Cusack, also co-writing and producing this film) into fictional 'Turquistan' state for a 'Brand USA' trade expo – which cynically exploits a profitable new 'humanitarian aid' crisis which aerial bombardment of entrepreneurial military action has created. *Lord Of War* meets *Dr Strangelove*, **War, Inc.** (DVD 16 March), boasts excessive and slapdash humour directed by TV documentarist Joshua Seftel. The film's premise entails a US military occupation having democracy-lite marketing campaign support, as ultimate sponsorship backup, so tank armour has poster adverts. Cusack's shrewd character is a deeply troubled antihero whose only confidant in all this urban chaos and corporate savagery is a (presumably online subscription-service) voice on his vehicle's Sat Nav and travel emergency helpmate. Marisa Tomei plays feisty reporter Natalie, Hauser's love interest, even before he single-handedly rescues her from snuff-movie peddling terrorists. Hauser's PR aide is the crazy smirk of Joan Cusack. Hilary Duff plays local pop star Yonica Babyyeah, packaged shamelessly as damaged ingénue/trainee virgin. Ben Kingsley is fine as an Oz-like villain orchestrating events from behind the scenes. Combat journalism is accelerated to

VR 'ride' serving popcorn with friendly-fire risks. Glib protagonist Hauser wants to save the little girl masked by a pimped-out bride yet his employers weakness for "humane precision" air-strikes puts all civilians in urgent need of outsourced home comforts like dry-cleaning, here delivered by an armoured personnel carrier with a reckless crew. Truth is not just the first causality; any reason is abandoned entirely while addicted Hauser contemplates another shot of hot sauce.

Talk is fast and witty, or cheap gibberish offering pop-psych analyses that reveal this corrupt showbiz milieu, of indecency and injustice, is held together by nothing of real consequence except corporate branding, despite best mayhem-management efforts of Hauser and his shadowy puppetmaster. Art

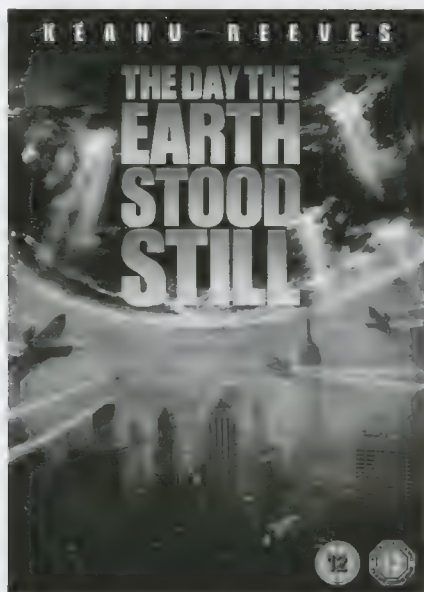
survives only as painting-by-numbers. Ray Davies' scathing 'The Tourist' is the perfect aural accompaniment to intro scenes.

It scarcely matters that apparent refugees are slaughtered by gunships. A submarine's faulty Tomahawk missile displays a greater 'poetic' sense of morality than any soldier. As in Larry Charles' extravagant satire *Masked And Anonymous* (2003), this explores a wild alternative reality, exposing much that's usually kept hidden or left unsaid, and is a far more valuable critique of US foreign policy, and the sheer preposterousness of modern warfare, than a merely-clever skewering of the disastrously incompetent and shallow Bush presidency in Oliver Stone's overhyped *W.* – really just another dreary Hollywood blathering about father-and-son issues.



The Signal (DVD/BD 6 April) is written and directed by David Bruckner, Jacob Gentry and Dan Bush as a fairly coherent three-part anthology of SF and extreme gore, in which each filmmaker picks up narrative threads from where his predecessor left off, continuing a tightly constructed plotline, shot in Atlanta, with fresh angles or *Rashômon*-styled alternative viewpoints. *Transmission I: Crazy In Love* sees adulteress Mya returning to suspicious husband Lewis (A.J. Bowen, *Creepshow III*) to find him arguing, like a child, with friends or neighbours. While TV strobes blurry colour, phones crackle and buzz, radios appear faulty too, and intense

violence breaks out. It's like *The Crazies* meets *The Happening*, with raw immediacy in its *Night Of The Living Dead* mood as frequently unnerving senseless murders turn the block of flats into a slaughterhouse. *Transmission II: Jealousy Monster*, shifts to black comedy when, in a tormented and delusional state, Lewis gatecrashes a New Year's party, resulting in mistaken identity with torture-porn agonies lightened by gallows humour. Intrusive guest Clark offers vaguely coherent explanations for homicidal reactions to hypnotic signals, and Lewis thinks his tinfoil hat will block the insidious influence. For *Transmission III: Escape From Terminus*, Mya is reunited with lover Ben, and they struggle to make sense of the rationality-scrambling threat, which twists perception so it's difficult to surmise what's actual 'reality' here, and what's only in a character's head. A broken marriage as succinct allegory for complete social collapse...horrific satire on slasher subgenre apocalypse...straightforward but intriguing exploitation flick assured of cult status? Partly inspired by a student film project (included as an extra), this darkly witty shocker delivers plenty of anxious moments in its catalogue of madness – and a batch of Internet episodes inflate the drama – to explore related aspects and platform related incidents occurring elsewhere. It lacks the intelligence of *Videodrome* (1982) or the surrealist imagination of *Kairo* (aka: *Pulse*, 2001), but *The Signal* is a vicious, gripping psycho chiller and a must-see for any fans of those films.



"Shut it down!" boomed the robustly 'Shakespearean' voice of Ian Richardson's adversarial overseer Mr Book, in Alex Proyas' suffocatingly enigmatic thriller *Dark City* (1998), and vast machineries of killjoy stop that nocturnal world from turning. No such memorably terse instruction enlivens **The Day The Earth Stood Still** (DVD/BD 20 April), an entirely derivative, wholly disappointing remake of Robert Wise's much-admired 1951 classic. Directed by Scott Derrickson (maker of that pseudo-scientific courtroom drama *The Exorcism Of Emily Rose*), this 're-imagining'

has no similarly distinctive formidability of purpose, in either its globe-spanning events or 'updated' characterisations, resulting in typical Hollywood skiffy that astounds us only with its vacuity and lack of genuine inventiveness. The problem with *DTESS* is that it arrives far too late. Following decades of superior 'first contact' films (*It Came From Outer Space*, *Man Who Fell To Earth*, 2001 and 2010, *CE3K*, *Cocoon*), not to mention TV shows (*UFO*, *The X-Files*), it proves to be a needless repetition of previous SF works. Though – as ever – its eco message (Klaatu is "a friend to the Earth," here to save the planet from abuse by mankind) is laudable, nobody is listening, so stupidity and conflict prevail, ensuring that any science fictional drama is undermined by irrational fears. The presence of Keanu Reeves as mysterious alien visitor Klaatu, bankable Jennifer Connelly as Helen Benson (1950s' widow/mother, here promoted to chief scientist), and John Cleese's cameo as sympathetic Professor Barnhardt, were probably crucial to get this blockbuster project started, but *DTESS* fails because its varied borrowings from earlier pictures are simply too numerous and obvious. The alien spaceship's rapid approach to Earth closely imitates the 'SpaceGuard' tracking sequence in television's *The 4400*; its design is copied from Carpenter's *Starman* (and Levinson's *Sphere*, in later scenes); while the night-time landing scene in Manhattan pays

obvious homage to *Close Encounters*' iconic mothership effects. Fresher SF moments are few and far between, and it replays key scenes from Wise's original (phrase "Klaatu barada nikto," uttered after the first shot is fired; the blackboard equation correction; robot Gort's destruction of US military hardware), with minor twists and simple tweaks. Emerging from his fleshy spacesuit, humanoid Klaatu overcomes 'clumsiness', so reminiscent of Jeff Bridges in *Starman*. Messianic imagery is more blatant here, yet it only mocks the self-sacrifice by Silver Surfer in Story's *F4* sequel. Given filmmaker Derrickson's penchant for folding religious notes into sci-fi pockets, he might appear to be an ideal director for *Hyperion Cantos* (announced for 2010 release) but, judging from this unfortunately mediocre work, it seems likely that visualising the grand complexities of Dan Simmons' landmark 'space opera' novels will defeat Derrickson's best efforts. Meanwhile, Wise's original *DTESS* is released on blu-ray on 20th April, and there's a low-budget, straight-to-DVD rip-off, *The Day The Earth Stopped* (23 March), from actor-director C. Thomas Howell.

We have 3 Blu-rays of the original 1951 version to give away. To be entered into the draw email izz22competitions@ttapress.com (or use the form on the website), using DTESS as your subject line and including your name and postal address, before the closing date of 30th June.

Certainly, the best superhero-team franchise to date, despite the dramatic narrative/richly thematic depth of the first pair of films compared to that clumsier third picture, **X-Men Trilogy** (BD 20 April) remains compelling viewing. Keen examinations of prejudice and intolerance filtered through the lightweight yet boldly philosophical vision of a future world populated by mutants with special abilities, every sequence of confrontation tightly focused interplay between various characters, who mostly avoid becoming stereotypes, espousing different opinions about viable solutions to difficult social and cultural problems. From the paranoid senator (Bruce Davison) opposed by both egotistical anarchist Magneto (Ian McKellan) and peaceable educator Professor Xavier (Patrick Stewart, making this iconic role of disabled psychic his

own, such that nobody else would be acceptable), the rebellious criminals of Magneto's brotherhood head for inevitably violent collision with X-Men from a 'school for gifted youngsters', over morally appropriate responses to government oppression represented politically by obligatory 'mutant registration' law. "Have you tried *not* being a mutant?" *X-Men 2* sees *X-Men*'s director Bryan Singer (*Usual Suspects*, *Superman Returns*, *Valkyrie*) returning to fulfil the demands of comic-book sequels, ramping up its quota of super-action, affecting tragedy and wry humour, while also introducing yet another batch of popular characters from Marvel comics. Developing fresh xenophobic plot angles, via corporate anxieties overcoming rational officialdom – blue fur-ball, the Beast (played by Kelsey Grammer) now advises the US president on 'mutant

affairs' – discovering a cure for mutation, quickly weaponised against weirdos that believe 'X-Men' embody human evolution with a superior twist instead of a wildfire disease in mankind's soul. As before, there are impressive super-ability deployments in effective applications as telekinesis, teleportation, metamorphic identity-theft, fire and ice, and brainwashing telepathy-induced hallucinations abound. There's inventive use of Magneto's powers, while feral Wolverine (Hugh Jackman, very good here but grossly overrated as movie star) vs Deathstrike (Kelly Hu, *Scorpion King*, *Martial Law*) is slickly choreographed and suitably brutal as very probably the best 'knife'-fight scene of all time! Whatever entertainment value is offered by its widescreen spectacle, there's no doubt that Brett Ratner (*Rush Hour* trilogy, *Family Man*, *Red Dragon*) ineptly helms the

combination ethnic-cleansing allegory/freedom-fighters showdown in *X-Men: The Last Stand* as a stumbling rush of brilliant moments interrupted by cringe-worthy cartoon drivel. The curse of many comic-books is that when stakes get higher, dialogue turns purple-prose clunky, and Ratner's unfortunately overambitious fantasy actioner succumbs to said principle without shame. Much of the gritty realism of Singer's films, plus all the gravitas emoted by an international cast, is thrown away in favour of annoyingly trite pulp-fiction misfortunes (including Prof X's telegraphed demise from the resurrected Jean Grey's Dark Phoenix mind-storm), and laughably cataclysmic upheaval (Golden Gate bridge re-routed to Alcatraz). Like the recent *Watchmen* movie, this adaptation, while not a complete failure, disappoints overall because it strives too hard to remain wholly faithful to comic-book sources. The levitating house gag and cure-in-a-gun development of 'voluntary' treatment for mutation both have a tendency to break up whatever tension or suspense was seemingly intended for their major plot-twists and unsettling set-pieces.

Ratner prefers to deliver punch-lines with hammering overkill. While the inherent optimism of comic-book super-heroism can be inspiring, that old Nietzschean saying, 'what doesn't kill you...makes you stronger' does not always ring true. Sometimes, what does not kill you...leaves you irreparably damaged. This tragic reality, as explored in Ang Lee's undervalued masterpiece *Hulk*, is not reflected here.



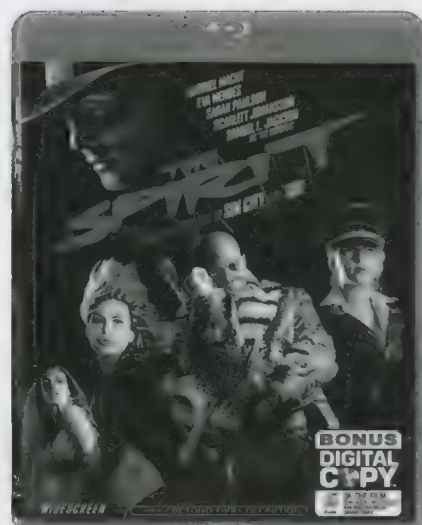
We have 3 Blu-rays of the trilogy to give away. Follow the instructions on page 61, using X-MEN as your subject line.

Released here as **The Promise** (DVD/BD, 27 April), Chen Kaige's magnificent fantasy *Wu ji* (2005) is tagged as the most expensive Chinese production so far. It's a lavishly colourful fairytale with so much cartoon-style CGI that it resembles 3D anime, mixed with the romantic heroism of those *Chinese Ghost Story* classics made in Hong Kong. Running slave Kunlun (Korean actor Jang Dong-kun, *Typhoon*, *Brotherhood*, *Coast Guard*, and sci-fi thriller 2009: *Lost Memories*) and General Guangming (Hiroyuki Sanada, *Ring* films, *Twilight Samurai*, space movie *Sunshine*) both love imprisoned Princess Qingcheng (Cecilia Cheung, *Tokyo Raiders*, *Lost In Time*, *White Dragon*, Tsui Hark's *Legend Of Zu*), but great beauty Qingcheng was cursed by a goddess and is destined to lose all her lovers. Wuhuan (Nicholas Tse, *Dragon Tiger Gate*, *A Man Called Hero*, *Gen-X Cops*), more vengeful than evil, usurps the palace throne when a masked hero kills the wicked king, and Qingcheng is temporarily freed – but finds no peace with Guangming (Wuhuan ensures no domestic bliss for a retired warlord) or Kunlun – who can move fast enough to reverse time, but cannot cheat fate. There's a birdcage for the princess, a magic cloak, flying swordfights,

a hilarious opening cattle stampede, a bloodthirsty finale, and philosophical speeches about the "futility of life without honour." Like the great *House Of Flying Daggers*, this exceptionally 'pretty' picture manages to overcome its clichéd dialogues, and the predictability of its love-triangle plot, with clever set design and scenic landscapes, each promoting an exotic ambiance that enhances particular dramas. Although it's less impressive than Yimou Zhang's inspired *Curse Of The Golden Flower* (2006) or astonishingly opulent *Hero* (2002) this delivers a welcome fix to viewers addicted to Asian fantasy cinema.



We have 3 Blu-rays of this film to give away. Follow the instructions on page 61, using THE PROMISE as your subject line.



From the groundbreaking cinematic template of 2005's *Sin City* comes Frank Miller's solo directorial debut **The Spirit** (DVD/BD 25 May), based on classic 1940s/1950s' comics by Will Eisner, melding the gothic superhero fantasy of Batman with film noir detectives like Mickey Spillane's Mike Hammer. Slain cop Denny Colt, mysteriously resurrected as obsessed urban vigilante (Gabriel Macht in his first lead role), becomes a guardian of crime-ridden Central City, where period costumes and wartime décor clash with a fuzzy sense of postmodern irony and out-of-place hardware, like a laptop computer and a squadron of Apache gunships. Formidably camp nemesis The Octopus (Samuel L. Jackson), and his cloned numbskull henchmen, are never as much a serious threat to the protagonist's incomprehensible heroism as the film's parade of mildly-jealous beauties, each ready to stab the narcissistic Spirit in the heart, whether figuratively or with a sword. Eva Mendes (*Ghost Rider*) is Sand Saref, young Colt's girlfriend turned thief. Scarlett Johansson (*The Island*) plays evil Octopus' witty partner Silken Floss. Paz Vega appears as homicidal dancer Plaster of Paris. There's also lady doctor Ellen (Sarah Paulson), who treats the hero's fleeting 'mortal' injuries, and 'Angel of Death' Lorelei (Jaime King, *They Wait*). Wallowing in a sexist parody of sensuality on quests for immortality and the Argonauts' lost treasure, perhaps these femme fatales are the only reason to watch this pointedly exquisite fantasy that embraces infantile cartoon simplicity, though it's obviously steeped in the same lore as *Miller's Crossing* (1990) and *Kiss Me Deadly* (1955). "You know the score." What spoils it, almost

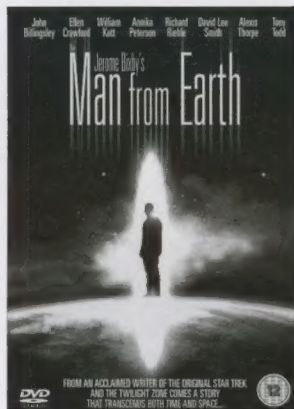
ruining the whole aesthetic of comic-book sirens and voiceover commentary, are the numerous abrupt shifts of tone, from Val Lewton homage to live-action Tex Avery tribute, that ensure all the characters' edginess is merely two-dimensional. "Shut up and bleed," snarls anti-heroine Sand to a wrong-place/wrong-time cop. And "Do I look like a good girl?" she asks, later. Unfortunately, after that 'perfect ass'

photocopy joke, the character only reminds us of alluring cartoon goddess Jessica in *Who Framed Roger Rabbit* declaring "I'm not bad. I'm just drawn that way." For a better example of this wacky kind of action movie, see Jet Li vehicle *Black Mask* (1996). At least the blu-ray edition of *The Spirit* ensures Miller's frequently dazzling visuals are the best glamour wallpaper available for your widescreen TV.

BACKLIST

Apart from an intentionally stageplay-like presentation, the movie's complete lack of any visual effects, and producer-director Richard Schenkman's deliberate focus upon 'telling not showing', **The Man From Earth** (2007) could have been a perfect SF satire. Acclaimed for influential *Star Trek* and *Twilight Zone* episodes, screenwriter Jerome Bixby (1923-98) reportedly completed this final work 'on his deathbed', thus adding layers of poignancy to a script with an already provocative storyline. Various professors attend the farewell party for departing colleague and friend John Oldman (David Lee Smith, *CSI: Miami*). With generally sombre judgement, John confesses to caveman origins as a 14,000-year-old immortal: impervious to physical scars, either cursed or blessed with a learned wisdom of millennia since Cro-Magnon lifetimes in late-Palaeolithic Europe, spreading 'primitive languages' throughout the Bronze Age, studying with the Buddha during his trek across India, surviving the Black Death, and moving on, with countless new identities, whenever his appearance (thirty-something forever!) aroused troubling suspicions or caused other insoluble problems. A brilliant hoax (anxious 'pitch' for a science fictional 'autobiography?'), the 'secret history' of a chameleonic wonder-man/ancient creator of myriad worldwide legends, or another delusional sociopath confessing to imaginary sins? Different emotional or thoughtful reactions to John's incredible tale segue from anger, fear, and envy, to bewilderment, outrage, and scientific fascination. Toying with the vagaries of 'recorded' history, and playfully exploring the inconsistencies of biblical texts and global folklore, the mythic nature of prime-mover, time-walker, eternal student John (not the apostle, but...) is optimistic in the 'anything is possible' mode of traditional SF, yet astutely combines such old-school

brain-storming with New Wave thinking and 'new weird' ambiguity, to greatly appealing, wholeheartedly satisfying, effect. With its ensemble cast of *Trek* franchise veterans, including John Billingsley (*The Nine*, Dr Phlox from *Enterprise*), Tony Todd (*Night Of The Living Dead* remake, *Candyman*), and Richard Riehle as Gruber, the gathering's disbelieving shrink, plus William Katt (*House* horrors), Ellen Crawford (*ER* regular) as devout Edith, Annika Peterson (Frederick Forsyth's *Icon*) as Sandy – who is secretly in love with John – and Alexis Thorpe (*Days Of Our Lives*) as bright student Linda, this farfetched yet persuasive drama features assorted scholarly characters with diverse perspectives on John's revelatory explanations and surprising answers to challenging questions, and boasts plenty of thought-provoking notions for genre fans/mainstream viewers alike, regardless that *The Man From Earth* amounts to no more than an occasionally whimsical variant on Bixby's canonical *Trek* episode, *Requiem For Methuselah* (1969), sans overt romanticism of TV space opera. Released last July, it's a DVD bargain now that's worth tracking down. Audio commentaries by Schenkman with sci-fi enthusiast Billingsley, and Jerome's son Emerson Bixby (executive producer) with Gary Westfahl (SF researcher/critic) are significant disc extras.



...AND THEN SOME: ROUND-UP

Recalling fondly remembered 1980s/early 1990s' days of low-budget genre action VHS rentals, when *Terminator* led – somehow inevitably – to Pyun's *Cyborg*, and the likes of Charles Band competed with Roger Corman to fill up video 'library' racks with countless easily digestible trashy productions, **Alien Agent** (DVD 6 April) is a throwback, vaguely reminiscent of *The Hidden* (1987) and *Starman* (1984) but without the style or directorial intelligence of either. Mark Dacascos (*Scorcher*, *Drive*, *Brotherhood Of The Wolf*, *Crying Freeman*) heads the cast as super-heroic Rykker, alone – except for waitress/sidekick (Emma Lahana) – against body-snatching aliens scouting Earth for invasion. Kim Coates (*The Island*) plays the human scientist fooled into helping build a teleport portal, and versatile Billy Zane (*Memory*, *Invincible*, *Titanic*) is the hapless small-town local guy 'resurrected' as host for alien leader Saylon, but the film rightly belongs to Amelia Cooke as Rykker's opponent Isis, gifted with ESP and gun-fighting proficiency. Following a previous sci-fi appearance as half-breed alien in *Species III*, she plays the standard model kick-ass baddie to a watchable degree, most notably in the opening's CGI-enhanced stunt sequence. Director Jesse Johnson (maker of space opera nonsense *The Last Sentinel*) serves a rental fee's worth of rip-off material and subgenre borrowings.

Genre films about writers and writing are usually psycho thrillers or schizoid comedy: *Adaptation*, *American Dreamer*, *Dark Half*, *Naked Lunch*, *Secret Window*, *Stranger Than Fiction*, *Writer's Block*, etc. The witches in TV series *Charmed* wrote spells and read them aloud to change reality. **Inkheart** (DVD/BD 6 April) focuses mainly upon the magic of reading, and is a full-blown fantasy adventure based on a novel by German author Cornelia Funke (see Richard Claus' *Thief Lord*). Directed by Iain Softley (*Hackers*, *K-PAX*, *Skeleton Key*), this stars Brendan Fraser as book restorer Mo, the 'silvertongue' whose reading brings imagination to life. While Mo and only daughter Meggie (Eliza Bennett, *Nanny McPhee*) search for a copy of a lost novel into which his wife (Sienna Guillory, *Eragon*) disappeared, they are pursued by villains led by Capricorn (Andy Serkis). Paul Bettany plays an errant sidekick, a fire-juggler named Dustfinger. Helen Mirren's reclusive bookworm Elinor is only present as comic relief. As

the rare book's author, Jim Broadbent catches on fast when he's confronted with 'personifications' of his fictive stereotypes. Jennifer Connelly puts more genuine feeling into her one-line cameo than the rest of cast manage all together during 100 minutes of generic waffle. Adding a crypto-zoo of creatures, including ultimate smog-zilla menace The Shadow, to fantastical notions previously explored in Oliver Stone's debut *Seizure* (1973) and Tibor Takács' *Hardcover* (aka: *I, Madman*, 1989), this occasionally witty postmodern daydream follows aimlessly in the feminist tradition of *Romancing The Stone*, as its female lead, young Meggie, takes charge of all this fanciful guff, collapsing quantum eigenstates from all improbable worlds into the safest one, while returning stolen bits and pieces of multiverse paraphernalia to rightful order, so a standard happy ending can be realised. There. "The written word... It's a powerful thing."

Christian Duguay's *Screamers* (1995) was moderately successful cyber-horror based on Philip K. Dick's story 'Second Variety'. Dan O'Bannon's co-scripter on that, Miguel Tajada-Flores (screenwriter of Brian Yuzna's robo-dog movie *Rottweiler*, 2004), has extracted, by some hand-waving/'re-imagining' process, another tale from the PKD source for belated sequel ***Screamers 2: The Hunting*** (DVD 20 April) that is directed by Sheldon Wilson, maker of averagely creepy shockers *Shallow Ground* and *Kaw*. Following the "As you know..." recap and video reportage, this continues its homage to Scott's *Alien* and Cameron's *Aliens* with a paramilitary starship on action-replay rescue mission to mining planet Sirius 6B, where runaway mecha threatens the few survivors of the earlier movie's warfare. Team leaders are played by genre TV's Greg Bryk (*ReGenesis*) and Gina Holden (*Flash Gordon*, *Blood Ties*). Veteran star Lance Henriksen tries to bring something worthwhile to his supporting role, but the squad doesn't find his bunker hideout until the last half hour, and by then it's really too late to salvage value or significance from this unabashed retreat of B-movie conventions and bargain-price production values, with Z-grade plotting and barely workmanlike direction. *Screamers* made a point about military tech evolution, but the robots first encountered here are stuck in that hyperactive leaping-mole gear, and the 'androids' remain hidden, so the original movie's story arc can be reproduced (keep that word in mind and

you can easily guess the closing twist). Most of the cast hardly perform well enough to recite their lines and emote at the same time. Even Henriksen coasts along on past experience. This sadly tedious sci-fi horror ends just where it should have begun.

Aqua Teen Hunger Force – season one (DVD 27 April), from cable TV network 'Adult Swim' – is a cheesy animated series about fast-food 'private eyes' blundering through irreverent sci-fi sitcom plots and suburbanite soap farce. Pleasantly anarchic humour abounds as slacker milkshake, Master Shake, mercilessly bullies endearingly simple-minded meatball hick Meatwad, while a flying bag of chips, wholly rational Frylock, struggles to mediate his immature housemates' disputes. While there's not much real detective work going on (although this feeds upon memories of *Scooby Doo*, genuine mysteries are few), the bickering trio loiter at their human neighbour's backyard pool and encounter all sorts of crazy stuff (often caused by local mad scientist Dr Weird), from leprechauns with laptops, mild mannered sentient mould, a smugly obnoxious pair of touristy snobs (visiting Mooninites, rendered as low-res pixels, mocking early computer game avatars), to a couple of incompetent alien invaders. Frylock is the only one with the capacity or temperament for solving crimes; Shake & Meat were probably expelled from sidekick school. The show exhibits much better comic timing with awkward/painful silences than with non-stop egregious banter. *ATHF* is quite amusing occasionally, but this two-disc package of 15-minute episodes is a strain to view in one sitting. In spite of the praise for its wide-ranging pop-culture references, this does not warrant serious critical attention.

Stanley Tong's timescape fantasy ***The Myth*** (aka: *San wa*, 2005, DVD 4 May) stars Jackie Chan as romantic dreamer/archaeologist Jack. He might be the reincarnation of ancient Chinese hero General Meng Yi, assigned the hazardous duty of transporting Princess Ok-soo (Kim Hee-seon, from lavish Korean epic *Bichunmoo*, 2000) to her fate as the Emperor's new concubine. Diverted from pursuing his vivid dreams, Jack teams up with physicist William (Tony Leung, *Double Vision*, *Election*, *Dumplings*) to investigate miraculous anti-gravity in Dasur, where a sacred coffin is wrecked and a magical 'jewel' meteorite stolen from its place of worship, resulting in police chases and martial arts rumbles very typical of

Chan's madcap adventure style. Star-crossed love in the Qin dynasty is connected, somewhat awkwardly, to modern intrigues concerning an "immortality pill" and the "slaves to destiny" finale sees Chan and his stunt team engage in ambitious CGI and wire fu sequences amidst the "living fossils" of weightless army guards in a cavern mausoleum, where the prized princess has waited millennia for her bodyguard to return. This is quite good fun overall, but its pace is uneven, internal story logic collapses to routine silliness midway through, and all its lively comedic charm fades shortly after Chan's encounter – in Dasur – with appealing Indian starlet Mallika Sherawat as a wise guru's kung fu-trained daughter.

While fans wait for J.J. Abrams' new *Star Trek* prequel movie, there's ***Star Wreck: In The Pirkinning*** (DVD 4 May) to contend with, or tide you over... This feature-length spoof made in Finland is directed by Timo Vuorensola, based on a series of animated shorts from the 1990s. Captain Pirk and his crew (of *Trek* characters parodying *Next Generation* officers more often than the original series) are stuck in the past, so must disobey the prime directive and use superior tech knowledge to conquer Earth, and make sure a cancelled American space programme doesn't curtail the time-travellers' own future. Russia builds first starship Kickstart and establishes Emperor Pirk's new empire. With rationalist android Info and grumbling plingon Dwarf, a moronic Pirk takes his fleet through a 'maggot hole' in deep space to discover the parallel universe where 'rival' humanity founded outpost 'Babel-13' (sending up *Babylon 5* of course). An epic battle starts, but first 'Captain SherryPie' makes a speech... Pirk invades B-13, yet fails to bed Ivanovista. Battle resumes, after drinking games (with bad behaviour). Battle continues while Pirk and SherryPie wrestle courage/cowardice options during shootout/punch-up in space station corridors. Reinforcements arrive (a lampoon of *B5* spin-off *Crusade*). More battle. Now, flagships showdown... Load 'light balls'. Set 'twinklers' to kill, and "All power to shove engines!" Battle on! Low-class CGI quickly becomes quite appealing, its sheer quantity in the 100-minute runtime conditioning viewers to overlook the middling quality. If these embarrassingly inane caricatures of populist spacer heroes can be no better than average fandom playacting, then make it so... The wartime-propaganda newsreel-montage jokes will raise a chuckle, at least.

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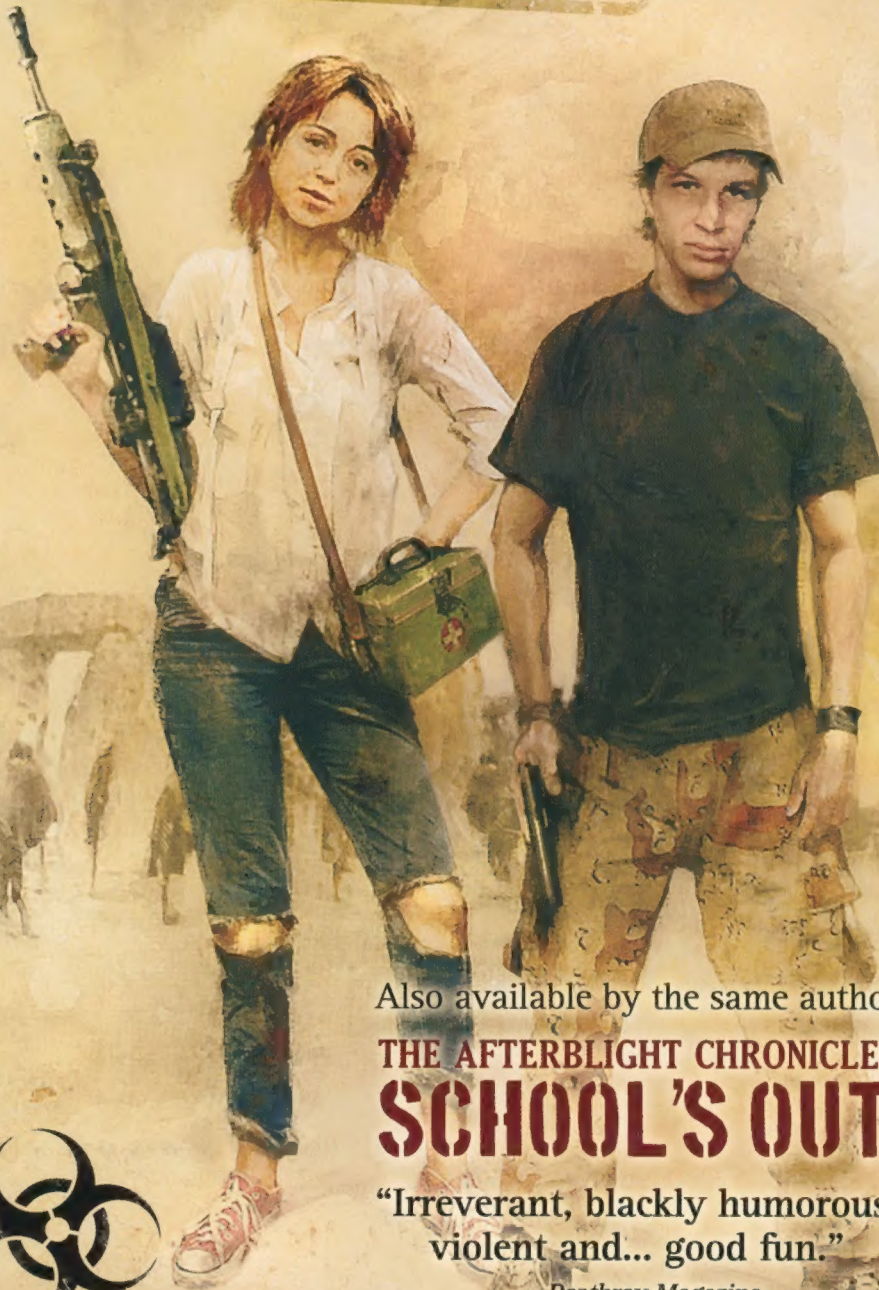
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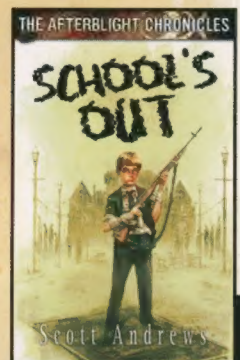


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